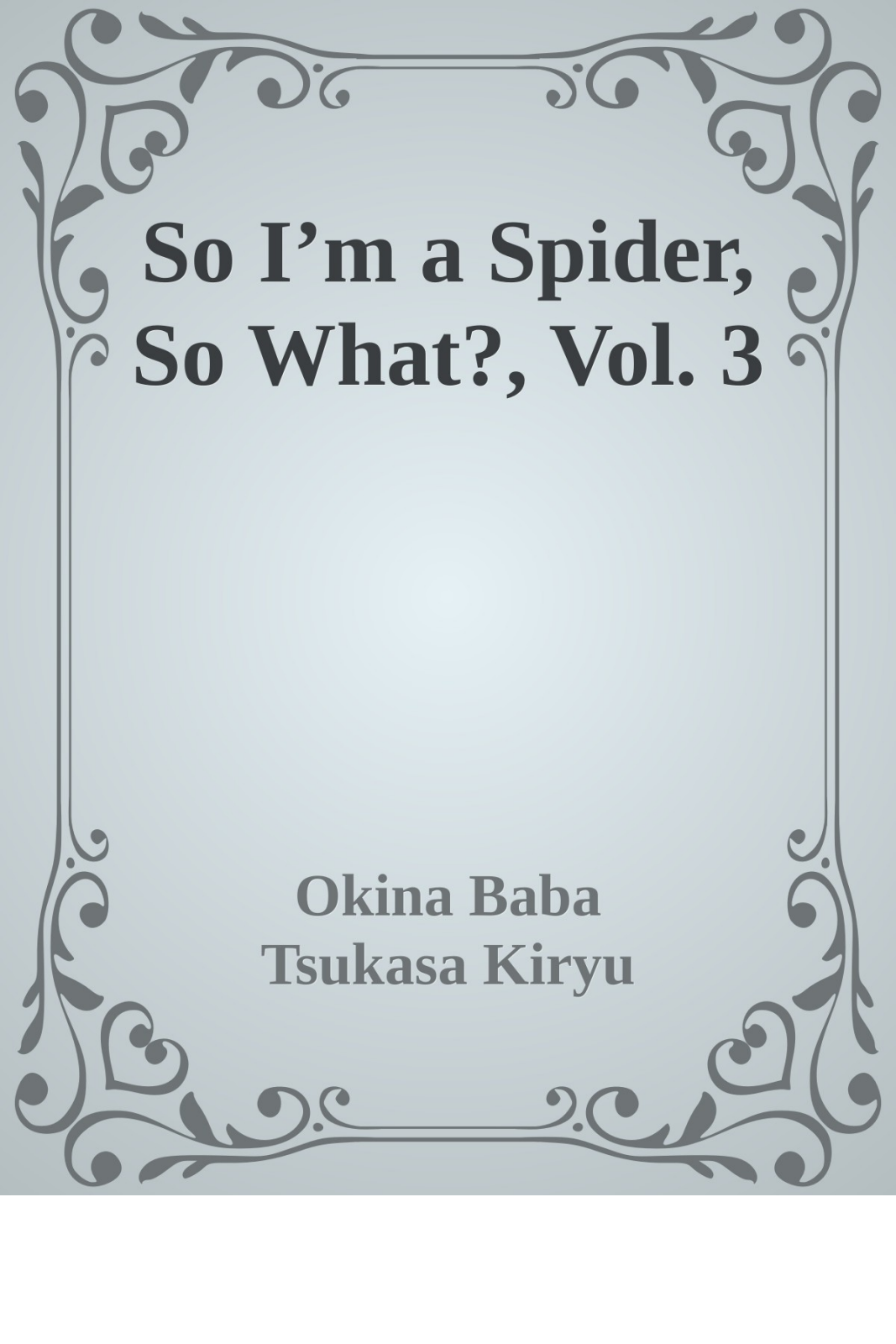


A decorative border with intricate floral and scrollwork patterns, rendered in a light gray color, framing the entire page.

So I'm a Spider, So What?, Vol. 3

**Okina Baba
Tsukasa Kiryu**

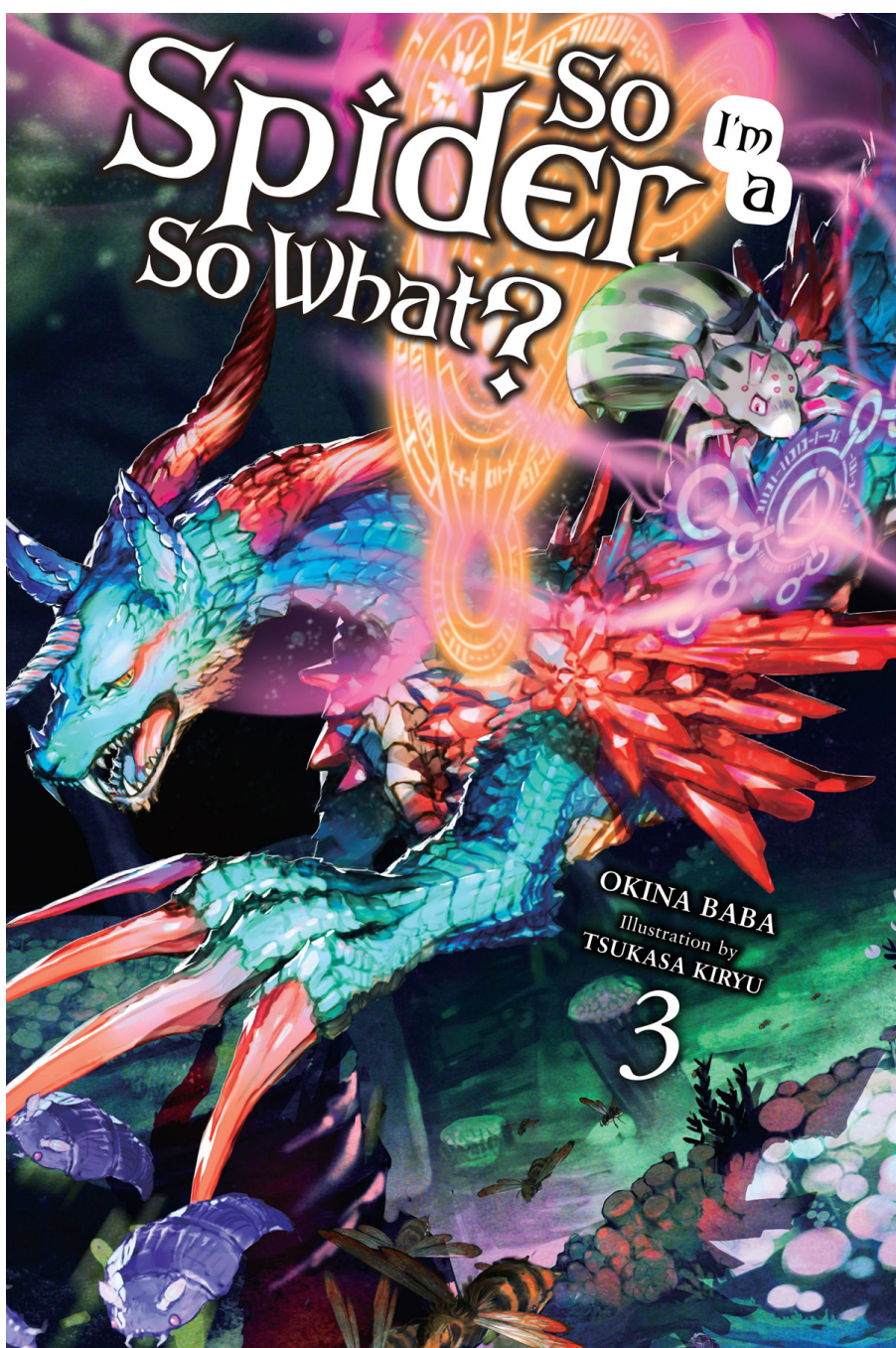
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Spider So I'm a So What?

OKINA BABA
Illustration by
TSUKASA KIRYU

3



I've gotten TOO strong...
Of course other monsters
run from me.
Now I can't
even hunt
properly...



My first friendly interaction
with humans here:
healing some injured
adventurers...



You guys are on your
own after this, got it?



Spider So I'm a Solidbat?



OKINA BABA
Illustration by
TSUKASA KIRYU

3

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New York

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So I'm a Spider, So What?, Vol. 3
Okina Baba

Translation by Jenny McKeon
Cover art by Tsukasa Kiryu

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KUMO DESUGA, NANIKA? Vol. 3

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First published in Japan in 2016 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION,
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First Yen On Edition: July 2018

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Baba, Okina, author. | Kiryu, Tsukasa, illustrator. | McKeon, Jenny, translator.

Title: So I'm a spider, so what? / Okina Baba ; illustration by Tsukasa Kiryu ; translation by Jenny McKeon.

Other titles: Kumo desuga nanika. English | So I am a spider, so what?

Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2017–

Identifiers: LCCN 2017034911 | ISBN 9780316412896 (v. 1 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316442886 (v. 2 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316442909 (v. 3 : pbk.)

Subjects: | CYAC: Magic—Fiction. | Spiders—Fiction. | Monsters—Fiction. | Prisons—Fiction. | Escapes—Fiction. | Fantasy.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.O44 So 2017 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017034911>

ISBNs: 978-0-316-44290-9 (paperback)

978-0-316-44294-7 (ebook)

E3-20180712-JV-PC

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Class Register

Homeroom Teacher: Kanami Okazaki
(Filinas)

Boys

Ren Aikawa
Kanata Ooshima
(Katia)
Kenichi Ogiwara
Shinobu Kusama
Naofumi Kogure
Issei Sakurazaki
Kyouya Sasajima
Kunihiko Tagawa
Dai Tsushima
Kengo Natsume
Kouta Hayashi
Maki Shouwato
Shunsuke Yamada
(Me)

Girls

Aiko Iijima
Mirei Shinohara
(Fei)
Asaka Kushitani
Sachi Kudo
Shuuko Segawa
Saki Temarikawa
Himiko Tonooka
Chie Nanase
Akiko Negishi
Yuika Hasebe
Mio Furuta
Hiroyo Wakaba



I'M GOING TO FIND THE OUTSIDE!

Do we want to eat delicious food?!

【Yeaah!】

『I'm sick of eating gross monsterrrrs!』

Let this proclamation go down in history!

I vow to escape the Great Elroe Labyrinth and eat delicious food in the outside world!

【Whoo-hoo!】

『We're with you!』

Which means that first, we have to escape the Middle Stratum!

There's a good reason I've declared my intent to escape this labyrinth so enthusiastically.

See, the frustration building up inside me has reached a boiling point.

Basically, the food here is god-awful.

A lot of days have passed since I became a spider monster for some unknown reason.

The place I was born is the world's biggest dungeon, the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

Unable to find a way outside, I've been spending all my time living in this labyrinth, but frankly, the food situation in here is unbearable.

I mean, the only things I can eat in this dungeon are other monsters.

Not to mention, they're all horrendously poisonous.

Now, the place where I'm currently situated, the Middle Stratum, actually has some nonpoisonous, tasty monsters, like catfish and eels.

But it's precisely because they exist that I've hit my limit.

'Cause that fire wyrm I killed, which totally looked like an evolved form of those guys, didn't taste even half-decent!

After all the work I put in to kill it, too...

Then I had to de-scale it... Well, my body brain had to, at least.

Look, it's not like it was gross, exactly.

But it was kinda weird. I definitely wouldn't call it delicious.

It was like a flavorless white fish. It probably would've been really good if there were some way to season it.

The moment that thought crossed my mind, though, the appetite I'd been suppressing all this time couldn't be held back any longer.

Even if the catfish and eel I ate were pretty good, there's only so much more I can bear.

And it's obvious they can't measure up to food that's actually been prepared to taste good.

I want to eat delicious stuff like that!

If I stay in this stupid labyrinth, all I'll ever have is more gross monsters.

I'm done with this!

I wanna go outside and eat a proper meal!

With this newfound determination, I've been revising my labyrinth escape plan.

Firstly, in order to get out of here, I need to travel from the Middle Stratum to the Upper Stratum.

The Great Elroe Labyrinth is a huge underground structure, so in order of their proximity to the surface, it's the Upper Stratum, then the Middle Stratum, and finally the Lower Stratum. Also, though I've never been there, there's apparently a Bottom Stratum, too.

I was originally born in the Upper Stratum.

That should be the layer closest to the surface.

Even there, everything was way too big and confusing, so I gave up halfway through on the possibility of escaping.

Then, after a lot of twists and turns, I ended up falling down a huge pit into the Lower Stratum, which was packed with strong monsters.

I somehow managed to get out of there, which is how I wound up in this fiery hellhole known as the Middle Stratum.

I don't know how expansive the Middle Stratum is, but if I'm not entirely off the mark, I should be steadily approaching the Upper Stratum...hopefully.

If I keep moving forward, I'll get there eventually.

As long as nothing goes wrong, anyway.

There are strong creatures like fire wyrms roaming around, so I can't let my guard down.

I mean, if I made one wrong step a little while back, that fire wyrm would've actually killed me.

And there's no guarantee there aren't even stronger monsters than that lurking around.

Like a straight-up fire dragon.

Dragons...

Just thinking about that word reminds me of the earth dragon Araba I encountered in the Lower Stratum.

That was definitely more terrifying than anything else I've seen in this world.

I barely escaped after it almost squashed me like a bug.

At the time, I couldn't even feel anger or regret.

All I could do was tremble in fear before such overwhelming power.

If I ever run into something that powerful again, I'm gonna run away without a second thought.

My top priority is staying alive. Escaping the labyrinth comes second.

I can't forget that.

Luckily, it's gotten a little easier to survive now that my combat ability has increased so much.

As long as I don't run into anything like that Araba.

But I seriously doubt that many equivalent monsters exist. Plus, the critters in the Middle Stratum are weaker than in the Lower Stratum, so I shouldn't have anything to worry about.

The fire wyrm I defeated was probably the boss of the Middle Stratum! Right? Gotta be.

Which means that as far as escaping from the labyrinth goes, my chances of reaching the Upper Stratum soon are looking pretty good.

As long as I continue exploring the Middle Stratum, I'm sure I'll hit the Upper Stratum eventually, and if I can train up some of my new skills like Spatial Magic, I bet stuff like teleporting will be possible sooner or later.

Once that happens, I could theoretically warp right up to the top without having to drag my butt all the way through the Middle Stratum.

But I have no idea how long it'll take to improve the skill or whether that's how it even works, so I better keep pushing ahead for now.

So anyway, I think the Middle Stratum will be fine.

The real problem is the step after that.

Escaping from the Upper Stratum to the outside world.

I don't know how that's gonna work.

Unlike the Middle Stratum, which has a single main path running through it, the Upper Stratum is more like a complicated maze.

Not to mention, it's ludicrously massive.

If I could learn Teleport and just pop outside, that'd be great, but I'm guessing there's a restriction of some sort. Maybe a requirement like you can only jump to places you've already physically visited...

That means I'll have to find an actual exit.

But given the size of the labyrinth, it feels like that could take years...

Great Elroe Labyrinth, you're breaking my heart here.

But I can worry about all that when I get back to the Upper Stratum.

Plus, even if I do manage to reach the outside world, there's still another problem.

In fact, that part might be the hardest issue to deal with.

'Cause, like...I'm a spider monster, y'know?

If I roll into a human town searching for some tasty food, I bet you anything they'll be all like, "A monster's attacking our homes! Kill it, kill iiiit!"

I mean, if I were a human and a spider monster suddenly appeared on the street, I'd probably react the same way.

Given this predictable outcome, I won't be able to get tasty cooked food no matter what I do.

Even if I do run into a human, I don't think I can just go, "Don't worry, tee-hee! I'm not a bad spider!"

I have two ideas for how to get around this.

One option is to evolve a bunch of times to become an arachne.

I'd still be a monster, but if I at least have a humanoid upper half, maybe I'll be treated with a little less suspicion than an ordinary monster.

Plus, having that kind of body probably means I'd be able to talk.

However, the evolutionary path to arachne is pretty long, so I'd have to be doggedly persistent.

The second option is to obtain the Telepathy skill.

As the name implies, it's a skill that allows the user to converse using their thoughts, so even if I can't physically speak, I'd still be able to communicate my intentions to others.

Getting this skill would be a lot easier than evolving into an arachne.

But I don't think Telepathy would be any use in combat.

If I ever become involved in a party, it'd be helpful for coordinating with my other party members, but I'm the definition of a loner.

Also, like I mentioned earlier, my top priority is ultimately to survive.

I can't really justify spending valuable skill points on a skill like Telepathy that isn't going to be useful in battle.

On top of all that, there's another very important point that poses a problem whether I go for arachne or Telepathy.

...I don't know the language of this world.

The Divine Voice (temp.) speaks in Japanese, but that doesn't

mean the rest of the world will be so kind.

I mean, sometimes in stories that have similar settings to my situation, it just so happens everyone speaks Japanese for convenience's sake, but this is a completely different world, so it's safer to assume no one understands my language.

If anything, it seems strange that the Divine Voice (temp.) speaks Japanese in the first place.

I get the feeling it's better not to think too hard about that, so I usually ignore it.

Most of all, even if I do speak whatever language people use, I'm really, really bad at talking to people.

My communication skills are so lacking that I frankly prefer to avoid interacting with others entirely.

I wasn't ostracized into becoming a loner in my previous life, you know!

I became a loner of my own accord because I prefer being alone!

It's true, okay? I'm not lying.

So, to sum it up, even if I do make it out of the labyrinth, I'll still have tons of problems.

Enough worrying about that. Let's take a look at my current status.

<Zoa Ele

LV 15

Nameless

Status: 602 (green) 18937

SP: 622 (yellow) 971

Average Offensive Ability: 606

Average Magical Ability: 40121

Average Speed Ability: 2,680

Skills:

[HP Auto-Recovery LV 7]	[Height of Occultism]	[SP Recovery Speed LV 6]	[SP Lessened Consumption LV 7]
[Destruction Enhancement LV 3]	[Cutting Enhancement LV 3]	[Poison Enhancement LV 7]	[Magic Warfare LV 2]
[Mental Warfare LV 4]	[Energy Conferment LV 2]	[Wyrm Power LV 1]	[Deadly Poison Attack LV 3]
[Rot Attack LV 1]	[Heretic Attack LV 1]	[Poison Synthesis LV 8]	[Threadsmanship LV 4]
[Utility Thread LV 1]	[Thread Control LV 8]	[Throw LV 7]	[Spatial Maneuvering LV 9]
[Stealth LV 8]	[Silence LV 5]	[Concentration LV 10]	[Thought Acceleration LV 7]
[Foresight LV 7]	[Parallel Minds LV 2]	[High-Speed Processing LV 3]	[Hit LV 9]
[Evasion LV 9]	[Intimidation LV 1]	[Heretic Magic LV 6]	[Shadow Magic LV 7]
[Poison Magic LV 7]	[Spatial Magic LV 1]	[Abyss Magic LV 10]	[Destruction Resistance LV 3]
[Impact Resistance LV 3]	[Cutting Resistance LV 3]	[Fire Resistance LV 4]	[Dark Resistance LV 2]
[Deadly Poison]	[Paralysis Resistance LV 4]	[Petrification Resistance LV 4]	[Acid Resistance LV 4]

Resistance LV 2]	5]	LV 3]	
[Rot Resistance LV 4]	[Faint Resistance LV 3]	[Fear Resistance LV 7]	[Heresy Nullification]
[Pain Nullification]	[Pain Mitigation LV 7]	[Vision Enhancement LV 10]	[Telescopic Sight LV 8]
[Night Vision LV 10]	[Vision Expansion LV 3]	[Cursed Evil Eye LV 7]	[Paralyzing Evil Eye LV 5]
[Auditory Enhancement LV 9]	[Olfactory Enhancement LV 7]	[Taste Enhancement LV 7]	[Tactile Enhancement LV 8]
[Celestial Power]	[Longevity LV 1]	[Instant Body LV 1]	[Endurance LV 1]
[Herculean Strength LV 4]	[Sturdy LV 4]	[Skanda LV 4]	[Demon Lord LV 1]
[Perseverance]	[Pride]	[Gluttony LV 1]	[Wisdom]
[Conviction]	[Hades]	[Taboo LV 8]	[Divinity Expansion LV 4]
[n% I = W]			

Skill Points: 0

Titles:

[Foul Feeder]	[Kin Eater]	[Assassin]	[Monster Slayer]
[Poison Technique User]	[Thread User]	[Merciless]	[Monster Slaughterer]
[Ruler of Pride]	[Ruler of Perseverance]	[Ruler of Wisdom]	[Wyrm Slayer]
[Fearbringer]			

>

Man, I've gotten really strong.

My stats are a lot higher now, but I've got so many skills that you can barely even tell what's going on at a glance.

Most of these are pretty useful, so that's all well and good, but without Parallel Minds, how in the world would I make sure they were all working?

Thinking of it that way, Parallel Minds is nothing short of fantastic.

Even if it can be a teensy bit annoying.

(Hey, I heard that, information brain!)

Oh, hush.

Still, though, it's crazy how much my magic stats have gone up.

At the very least, it's the one category where I might have a chance to surpass that earth dragon's stats I caught a glimpse of once!

That being said, my physical stats are still pretty low. On the whole, I've got a long ways to go.

Still, I was able to defeat a wyrm, which is one step away from a dragon, so I think I'm allowed to be a little confident.

I could be on par with a dragon someday.

Maybe I'll eventually have my revenge on that Araba?

Nope, on second thought, forget that.

Earth dragons are scary. Seriously scary.



NEW HERO

My teacher was quick to inform my father that I had received the Hero title.

Shortly afterward, my father summoned me home, so I left the school to return to the royal castle.

This is my first time coming home in ages.

But my mental state is nowhere near stable enough to spare a thought for that right now.

Trying to calm my swirling thoughts, I meet with my father.

Instead of the audience room, I head toward my father's office.

It's a large room with documents scattered everywhere.

Besides the two of us, several others have gathered.

"Schlain. I'm sorry to call you here like this."

My father speaks gravely when I enter the room.

Even though I've actually met him only a handful of times, I can tell that the tone of his voice is heavier than usual.

It's far more solemn than it was even at the Appraisal ceremony.

"First, please allow me to have you Appraised to confirm you have the Hero title."

"Of course."

My father is holding the same Appraisal Stone that was used in the ceremony.

As soon as I agreed, I felt an uncomfortable sensation begin running throughout my body, like I was being licked all over.

This was the same feeling I had when I first met my teacher.

It must be the discomfort of being Appraised.

"...You really do have it."

My father's voice grows even heavier.

Then he covers his face with his hands and begins to weep.

"Julius..."

My older brother's name escapes my father's lips.

As soon as I hear it, I feel the tears welling in my own eyes.

I try to control myself, to remember where I am, but I can't stop it. My vision blurs.

I feel a hand on my shoulder.

It's the third prince, my next-eldest brother, Leston.

He embraces me gently and strokes my hair.

I haven't seen Leston very often, either.

But he's a good-hearted person, and the brother I was closest with after Julius.

It's too much for me to bear: I've passed my limit.

I cling to my brother Leston and sob uncontrollably.

For a while, the cries are all that fill the room.

"Father. I know we are all mourning Julius. However, we must think to the future as well. Let's begin talks, shall we?"

The person who speaks up to dispel the dark atmosphere is the first prince, our eldest brother, Cylis.

To be honest, I'm not super-comfortable with him.

He's always immersed in his work with a sour look on his face. I've never seen him laugh once.

Aside from my older sister, who I've never met, since she married into another kingdom, he's the only sibling I've never felt an attachment to.

"Brother Cylis, Father and Shun are clearly in pain. Surely we can give them a little more time to grieve?"

"It's all right, Leston. What Cylis says is true."

"But, Father..."

"Restrain yourself, Leston. Father has spoken."

"Brother Cylis..."

"All right. As a family, the depths of our sorrow know no bounds. But before we are individuals, we are royalty. And as such, we must fulfill our duties to the people. Only once that is done may we grieve."

My father wipes his tears away with his sleeves.

His eyes are red and swollen from crying, yet they are filled with a powerful light.

Is this what it means to be a king?

Amazing. I wouldn't be able to even come close to imitating it.

"The fact that Schlain has inherited the title of Hero...must mean Julius is dead."

Tightening his lips, my father lays out the words that no one had spelled out yet.

Hearing it said aloud, I feel as if I'm being confronted with the reality of Julius's death all over again.

"It is unthinkable that the next hero after Julius should hail from our kingdom again, never mind being his own brother. Perhaps fate does not smile favorably upon us..."

My father looks far from pleased by the fact that I've become the next hero.

It might just be because he's mourning Julius's death, but he

seems genuinely bewildered that I was chosen.

It's very rare for the hero to come from a royal family.

The qualifications that determine who's chosen are unclear, but they have nothing to do with a person's rank or social status.

It's said that the title is given to a human with a pure and honest spirit, but no one knows for sure if that's true.

When Julius was chosen as the hero, there was a lot of dispute over it because of his status as royalty.

A second hero belonging to the exact same royal family might cause unnecessary chaos.

That must be what my father is worried about.

"Schlain, this hasn't been made public yet, but we received word that the demon army has finally begun its invasion. More likely than not, Julius lost his life fighting against them."

The demon army.

I have heard lots of talk that the demons were becoming more active, but I guess the time has finally come.

So even Julius couldn't defeat them...

"No information on the outcome of that battle has arrived yet. We sent a talented Spatial Magic user to investigate, but—"

At that moment, someone knocked on the door.

"Come in."

"Thank you."

I don't remember the name of this person, but I think it's one of the generals of our kingdom.

The man slowly walks to the middle of the room and kneels.

"I have come with intelligence regarding...the battle between the human army and the demon army."

"Perfect timing. What's the situation?"

"Sir... The battlefield is still in chaos, so I don't know all the details, but it seems that our side has narrowly managed to drive back the demon army, at the cost of massive casualties."

"I see. Go on."

"What we do know now is that several fortresses have fallen. According to our reports, this includes Fort Kusorion."

"What?! That enormous fortress?!"

"Y-yes, although that has not been confirmed. That area is in chaos, so many baseless rumors are flying about. There is hearsay and speculation afoot claiming that the demon army has summoned a massive monster or that the forts were blown away with the largest spell man has ever seen, but it's difficult to confirm how much of that is true."

"I see. But it's been confirmed that the demon army has withdrawn, correct?"

“Indeed. That I can say without a doubt.”

“Understood. Thank you for your report. Please continue gathering information.”

“Yes, sir! Then, if you’ll excuse me...”

The general leaves the room.

My father closes his eyes and furrows his brow, pondering something deeply.

My brothers and I wait for his next words.

“It seems Julius’s death is not assured.”

“Indeed. There is still a great deal of confusion on the battlefield. What shall we do?”

“For the moment, let us keep Julius’s death and Schlain’s acquisition of the Hero title a secret.”

Not a soul could object to my father’s decision.

I don’t really understand politics myself, so I figured it best not to run my mouth.

“We still don’t know for sure whether the demon army has fully withdrawn. If we were to announce that the hero has died, we could cause needless anxiety among our people. I’m sure word will spread from the battlefield eventually and Julius’s death will become widely known, but until then, let us keep it to ourselves.”

“Father, what of Schlain?”

“Unfortunately, in light of today’s events, Schlain will have to withdraw from school immediately. And, Schlain...please be prepared to announce yourself as the new hero at a moment’s notice.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I know this is all very sudden, but from now on, you are the hero. You must carry on in Julius’s footsteps and take up arms on the front lines of battle as humanity’s greatest hope. Now, you may not be prepared for that just yet. We have little time until word gets out about Julius’s death, but...you will have to steel yourself in that short period.”

Humanity’s greatest hope?

I...I won’t suddenly be ready to shoulder something like that.

“You will need time to sort out your thoughts, I’m sure. Take the remainder of today to rest.”

My father’s voice has become gentle.

I suppose I should take him up on his offer.

“Thank you. Excuse me.”

With a few short words, I leave the room.

My father and Leston look after me with concern. Cylis’s eyes are cold.

I close the door behind me to cut off their gaze.

I feel like I could collapse on the spot, but I manage to keep

walking forward.



Interlude

PRINCE

THE TEACHER AND THE THIRD

“So Shun inherited the Hero title.”

“This is terrible.”

“Yeah. And something suspicious seems to be going on around here. I might not be able to handle it on my own.”

“Understood. I will return at once.”

“I’m sorry to bother you while you’re so busy already.”

“A teacher always does her best for her students.”

“I respect that about you.”

“Thank you. Although I don’t remember being such a hot-blooded character, myself.”

“Have you reported to Master Potimas?”

“I have. In the worst-case scenario, we may need to consider having the elves shelter Shun.”

“I see. Yes, that may be for the best.”

“You don’t object?”

“I don’t want to lose another brother after Brother Julius. Of course I want to do whatever will keep him alive, even if it means I can never see him again.”

“Very well. We’ll do our best, then.”

“All right. I’m counting on you.”



LABYRINTH'S ZENITH, I CALL THEE MOTHER

Several days have passed since I made up my mind to reach the outside.

Exploring the Middle Stratum has been going smoothly.

Yep, it's been all right so far.

Ever since I crossed the sea of magma where I was attacked by the fire wyrm and made it to proper land, things have proceeded uneventfully.

That's right, uneventfully.

In fact, maybe too uneventfully.

Liiiiiterally nothing is happening, actually.

What I'm trying to say is that all the monsters around here, like the seahorses that used to attack me at every step, have instead been running away as soon as they lay eyes on me.

Now, that's surprising.

Aren't you guys supposed to be an aggressive species?

Shouldn't you get all fired up when you see a strong opponent worthy of your time?

Fleeing is disgraceful for a species supposedly known for its love of fighting, you see.

I know the reason they're acting this way, though.

It's the Fearbringer title I got in the battle with the fire wyrm.

On top of the title applying a "fear" effect to anything within my line of sight, it also comes with a bonus skill called Intimidation that carries a similar effect. It's like I'm the biggest bully in school.

Thanks to that, as soon as other monsters see me, they scatter with their tails between their legs.

Apparently, the fear effect is strong enough to overcome even a monster's most basic impulses.

And unfortunately, I can't turn off the effects of the title.

I can switch the skill Intimidation on and off, but even when I deactivate it, the result is the same.

So now all the warlike species of the Middle Stratum have turned

into a bunch of cowards.

Because of that, I haven't had a single monster battle.

Meaning I can't get any food or experience points.

I'm fine on the EXP side, I guess.

I'd like to keep earning more and raising my level if possible, but since no one in the Middle Stratum would dare oppose me, that's not as big a deal.

On the other hand, I'm about to find myself in a serious food supply problem.

My only source of nutrition in the labyrinth is the flesh of other creatures.

I won't have anything to eat if I can't take down some monsters.

If they were on land, I could ambush them before they could run into the magma...but apparently, my aura of fear cancels out my Stealth skill or something, 'cause now everyone notices me long before I get near them.

They book it into the magma before I can touch them.

Once they're in there, I can't do a damn thing, y'know?

Argh, I wish I had a fishing line that wouldn't burn up.

Not that I have bait to use as a lure anyway.

Currently, my red stamina gauge that was nice and full after eating the fire wyrm, eels, and so on is now slowly but steadily decreasing.

It won't be an issue this very instant, but I'll die of starvation once it runs out. I have to come up with a plan before that happens.

The ideal situation would be to get out of the Middle Stratum and into the Upper Stratum before it reaches a critical point.

There's no magma in the Upper Stratum, and with my speed, I could easily catch any monster that tries to run away.

If it weren't for this stupid magma, I wouldn't be having this problem in the first place.

The most powerful enemy I've faced in the whole Middle Stratum is this hot mess.

Well apparently, I spoke too soon.

Ever since I arrived in the Middle Stratum, or maybe around the time I got Pride, I've been getting a lot stronger.

That's how I was able to beat the eels, fire wyrm, etcetera, etcetera.

I might've gotten a little too full of myself after I won that battle.

There's always someone who's stronger than you.

In my case, it's someone I already knew existed.

As I was traveling through the Middle Stratum, I found a huge hole.

It was a massive shaft that ran through the Middle Stratum to the other layers, similar to the one I fell through that led to the Lower Stratum.

But the instant I laid eyes on this particular pit, I felt an incredibly strong sense of danger emanating from it.

Since being reborn in this world, I've had countless brushes with danger.

However, I've felt an extreme sense of crisis and fear on only three occasions.

Two of those were when I sighted the earth dragon Araba, a harbinger of death that I met in the Lower Stratum.

The third time...is slowly coming into view at this very moment.

Eight enormous eyes gleam in the magma's glow.

Eight legs, so large that they tower like buildings, easily bore holes into the sheer walls.

In terms of shape, it's not too far from how I looked before I evolved into a Zoa Ele.

But the difference in size and presence can only be described as *huge*.

For the first time since being reborn in this world, I feel overwhelmed with despair.

Hello, Mother.

Long time, no see.

Looming before me is an enormous spider monster, the one who gave birth to me.

Even if this is the largest labyrinth in the world, I doubt there are many of these creatures hanging around. If there were, I'd already be dead.

This must be the same one I saw shortly after being born.

Unfortunately, I can't Appraise it because it's so far away.

If I could, I'm sure its stats would be so horrifying that I'd probably have to laugh.

I am curious, but I definitely don't want to get any closer.

Despite all the distance between us, my legs are already wobbling.

I don't need to use Appraise to know in my gut that I should be terrified.

My mother moves slowly down the wall of the pit.

Then another enormous shadow draws near.

This monster is similar to the fire wyrm I defeated earlier, but it's definitely one size bigger, plus it has wings.

It must be a higher-ranked monster than the fire wyrm.

In which case, maybe it's a fire dragon?

This possibly-a-fire-dragon flies toward my mother.

A swarm of Middle Stratum monsters follows close behind.

Ohhhh?! What's going on?! Is this an epic monster battle?! A territorial dispute?!

I gulp, swallowing my spit.

It feels like I'm watching a giant monster movie in the theaters.

But instead of seeing things play out on a screen, it's happening right before my eyes. This is intense!

My mother and the fire dragon army fiercely stare each other down.

I'm not close enough to Appraise them, so I don't know their stats, but if this fire dragon is comparable to that Araba, the fight might be evenly matched.

In terms of physique, Mother definitely has the advantage, but the fire dragon has its minions to make up for that.

However, my hopes for a lively monster battle are unexpectedly betrayed in an instant.

Mother matter-of-factly points her fangs toward the fire dragon and its army.

Immediately after, the world trembles.

I'm not using the phrase as a metaphor. The ground is actually shaking.

Even though I'm theoretically far removed from the danger zone, the aftershock is enough to knock me off my feet.

The vibrations run through the ground as if the entire labyrinth itself is screaming.

If I had to describe it with a sound effect, it'd probably be *RATTLE-RATTLE!* or *KABOOM!*

I don't really know what kind of attack it was. It was far beyond the scope of my comprehension.

All I know is, once I get back on my feet, I see a freshly made enormous crater where the fire dragon army once stood.

Between this and Araba, I gotta say, do super-strong monsters have a hobby of making craters or what?

Maybe I'll understand when I'm old enough to be able to make one myself?

Ha-ha-ha... Okay, enough joking around.

Magma is flowing into the new crater.

Oh, I guess that's how magma lakes are made?

Huh? Wait. The fire dragon army... There's not so much as a crumb left behind!

Apparently satisfied with the results of her destructive attack, Mother slowly starts going back down into the pit.

Man, I figured she was crazy strong for an Upper Stratum

monster, but this is a whole other level.

I'm sure that species normally makes its home in the Lower Stratum, or even the Bottom Stratum.

If that thing was wandering around the Upper Stratum all the time, it'd be enough to destroy the entire ecosystem there.

Maybe she went to the Upper Stratum to lay eggs or something.

Her offspring consists of taratectes that are both "small" and "lesser," after all.

The fact that such an insanely powerful beast gives birth to such garbage-level small-fry baby spiders could probably be one of the Seven Wonders of the Monster World.

O Great Mother! Why couldst thou not hand that incredible strength down to your children?!

My life in the labyrinth would've been so much easier!

Oh, but in that case, I guess the family feuds would get pretty vicious.

Those guys will happily kill and eat their siblings if they're hungry enough.

If all of them had the same degree of power as Mother... Yeah, that'd probably bring down the whole labyrinth.

All right, maybe it's better this way after all.

Forget the labyrinth—if a massive swarm of monsters that powerful existed, the whole world could very well collapse.

Aaaand while I was being distracted with these worthless thoughts, Mother vanished into the pit.

Even after she disappears, I stay in the same place for a while.

<Proficiency has reached the required level. Skill [Fear Resistance LV 7] has become [Fear Resistance LV 8].>

<Proficiency has reached the required level. Skill [Stealth LV 8] has become [Stealth LV 9].>





One month has passed since I left school.

In that time, I've done nothing but solo training at the castle.

Now that I'm the hero, I need to become stronger.

At least, that was my official reason. Really, it was mostly because I had to do something to keep my thoughts from spiraling out of control.

Exercising makes me feel a tiny bit better.

From what I've heard, Julius's death is being kept a secret from the world at large.

My father probably played a big role in this, but it could also be that the other kingdoms felt it would be dangerous to reveal the hero's death during a time of such unrest.

It seems word has already made its way around on the battlefield, but in this kingdom, at least, where it's far away from the front lines, there's still some time before the rumors spread.

Apparently, the demons haven't attacked since.

Their army sustained considerable losses in the battle as well, so the assumption is that they won't be making any moves for a while.

That being said, I can't let my guard down.

This isn't someone else's problem for me anymore.

School is apparently still going on as usual.

I often use Fartalk to communicate with Sue, Katia, and the others about it.

"How are things going over there?"

"Same as ever. Aside from a bit of confusion over why you left school so suddenly."

"All right. Tell everyone I said hello, okay?"

"Yes. Of course."

"Hi, Sue. How are you?"

"I'm well."

"That's good. How are things going there?"

"Yuri was called back to the Church today."

"She was?"

"Yes. Most likely, the information about Julius's death has been relayed to the Church as well."

"Right, and since she's supposed to be the next saint..."

"Exactly. What do you think happened to the saint who worked with Julius?"

"From what I've heard, his entire party was lost except for Hyrince."

"...I see."

"I've been told Hyrince will be returning soon. I should be able to talk to him, I think. I have a lot of questions."

"Of course. Please try to keep a low profile, okay?"

"Hmm? Father did tell me not to talk about being the hero until it's formally announced, if that's what you mean. I won't do anything stupid."

"I hope not."

"C'mon, don't say that. Or are you just worried about me?"

"Of course I am."

"Oh. Well...thank you."

"...You're welcome."

We had a lot of conversations like that.

Hyrince is a childhood friend of Julius's, a warrior who's fought side by side with him.

I've met him a few times when he was together with my brother.

Once Hyrince comes back, I'll definitely be asking him some questions.

How did my older brother die?

To be honest, I have a hard time believing that my brother could have been defeated so easily when he was so strong.

Did he get caught in a cowardly trap? Or did he face an army too numerous even for him to handle?

There's no way my brother lost in a one-on-one duel.

When Hyrince is back, I'll finally be able to get some answers.

We've gotten a lot more information about the state of things at the battlefield by now, but most of the facts regarding Julius are still unknown.

All I know is that Hyrince is the only member of my older brother's party who survived.

The only magic user in this kingdom who's capable of using Teleport is currently flying about gathering information, but in this case, it might be faster to simply wait for Hyrince's arrival.

What information the mage has brought back from the battlefield has all been crushing.

On the border between human and demon territory, each side has constructed fortresses to prevent the other from invading.

There were eight fortresses on the human side, which fended off

demon invasion for a long time.

But in this battle, the demons sent forces to attack all eight forts.

Although the exact number of soldiers is unknown, it's said that it was the largest army ever gathered.

The Renxandt Empire, which is the kingdom closest to the border, fought back with all its might alongside reinforcements from neighboring kingdoms.

In terms of sheer scale, it would be no exaggeration to say that this is now an all-out war between humans and demons.

And of the eight human fortresses, half of them have fallen.

The hardest loss is Fort Kusorion, our most important point of defense.

Apparently, the battle was going well until an enormous monster appeared out of nowhere, after which the fort was destroyed.

Based on its sudden appearance, many believe the demons summoned it, but apparently, it caused damage to the demon army as well.

The monster that was summoned is known as a legendary-class monster: the incredibly strong spider monster called a queen taratect.

According to reports, it's a walking calamity that destroyed an entire army spearheaded by a hero.

Since it also attacked its allies on the demon side, it's generally thought that it was simply summoned to the battlefield without a contract. But either way, the beast is an enormous threat.

This wasn't the only attack that utilized monsters, either. Fort Okun was apparently brought down by a swarm of creatures.

In this case, it was a species called the anogratch, also known as the "vengeful monkey."

There are periodic surges in sightings of this monster near the human-demon border. It's common knowledge that if one of them is killed, the rest of the group will not rest until they've annihilated the killer.

Taking advantage of that trait, the demon army somehow released a live anogratch into Fort Okun, where one of the fortress's soldiers killed it.

This brought a massive horde of anogratches down onto the fortress seeking revenge, charging the defenses until it eventually fell.

If there's any silver lining, it's that the anogratches then took up residence in the fort, so the demon army won't be able to use it, either.

The other two forts were brought down by direct military attacks.

Though the other four forts survived, they didn't come through unscathed, either.

Three of them just barely escaped complete destruction. None of

the enemy commanders was captured, so it's not like we can really consider these victories.

Only Fort Dazarro—which was under the command of Elder Ronandt, said to be the strongest living human mage—was able to achieve complete victory by bringing down the enemy commander without sustaining heavy losses.

Looking at the situation as a whole, it seems like a stalemate at best.

But given how much our defensive position has deteriorated, you could probably call it a defeat.

The demon army probably took a comparable number of casualties, but with most of our forts damaged or destroyed, they've managed to open up a path into human territory proper.

There's no way of knowing when they'll reorganize their forces and begin the true invasion.

And when the assault does resume, I'll be standing on the front lines of the battlefield as the new hero.

To be honest, I'm scared.

I always dreamed of someday fighting at Julius's side, but I thought that day was still in the distant future.

I never thought I would have to take to the battlefield so quickly, and I certainly never imagined that my brother would die.

...No, I should stop lying to myself.

Even if my brother Julius were still alive, I doubt I would have ever fought by his side.

Fighting frightens me.

I'm reluctant to even kill monsters. If my opponent has a clear will and intelligence, there's no way I'd be able to do it.

But it's not because I'm kind and caring like Julius was.

I'm a coward.

And yet, I'm supposed to succeed him as the next hero.

No one knows better than I do that I could never become the incredible hero he was.

Which is why the title of Hero feels like a weight bearing down on me.

On top of that, I'm alone now.

No Sue, who's been by my side since I was born, or Katia, who I've spent time with since our previous lives.

They're at the academy. I can't take them with me to the battlefield.

Besides, Sue is a princess, and Katia is the daughter of a duke.

Even if this ends up being a battle to determine the fate of mankind—no, *especially* if it does—I could never put them in such a dangerous position.

Although, it's possible Yuri will be with me if she's appointed as the saint.

And that's only if she's chosen from among the other candidates for future sainthood.

The only one who'd be able to come with me without worrying about their position is Fei, who's contracted to me as a familiar. But even then, I'm not sure if I want to bring her.

Before I was appointed the new hero, Fei and I formally entered a contract as master and familiar.

As a result, I can now call Fei to my side from anywhere in the world with the Summoning skill.

Technically, I can also use that skill to give orders that Fei would be forced to obey, but I have no intention of doing that.

The master-familiar relationship is only a formality; we're still essentially equals.

The contract is really only so that I can summon her if need be.

Honestly, I wasn't particularly interested in making the contract at all, but Fei was the one who suggested it.

She said things would be more convenient that way.

But as soon as I became the hero, something strange happened to Fei.

When I saw it tucked away in a remote spot of the castle, I couldn't hide my shocked gasp.

Enshrined in that corner is something that looks like a huge egg covered in a white shell.

And that "egg" is actually Fei.

I have no idea why she suddenly entered this egg-like state.

But when I became the hero and was summoned to the castle, this was what happened.

When I Appraise it, it simply says "Wyrms Egg." I don't even know if Fei is alive in there.

Even so, I'm afraid to break the shell.

The shell is quite hard, so even if I wanted to crack it open, it would take a considerable amount of strength.

But if Fei is in there, I can't just carelessly attack the shell, or I might hurt her.

A scholar of the castle examined it and told me she's probably alive inside and I should leave it as is, but that hasn't eased my anxiety at all.

None of my friends are with me, Fei is in this strange condition, and yet, I'm supposed to somehow prepare myself to be a hero.

I feel like the pressure is going to crush me.

That's why, for now, I'm concentrating entirely on training.

Exercising my body without thinking, to hold my thoughts at bay.

That's all that I can do.

I continue to push my body past its limits until my mind goes completely blank.



SPIDER VS FIRE DRAGON

Even after Mother descended into the huge shaft, many minutes passed before I could no longer sense her presence.

I might have even been standing here for more than an hour.

Finally, I start moving again.

First things first. I put as much distance as possible between the hole my mother passed through and me.

If I climb up through that pit, I could probably reach the Upper Stratum, but I have no desire to do that.

I'm scared of Mother. Literally terrified.

Even if my brain can logic out that she won't find me, my body absolutely refuses.

Slow and steady wins the race. Or stays alive, at least.

Better to plan for the worst-case scenario. I can't underestimate how low my luck stat really is.

Seriously, how unlucky can I get?

<Fire dragon Rend LV 20

Status 3,702 (details)

SP: 336 (details)

Average Offensive Ability: 3,209 (details)

Average Magical Ability: 2,450 (details)

Average Speed Ability: 3,175 (details)

Skills:

[Fire Dragon LV 1]	[Imperial Scales LV 8]	[HP Rapid Recovery LV 3]	[MP Auto-Recovery LV 6]
[MP Lessened Consumption LV 6]	[Magic Power Perception LV 5]	[Magic Power Operation LV 4]	[SP Rapid Recovery LV 1]
[SP Minimized Consumption LV 1]	[Magic Power Attack LV 4]	[Flame Attack LV 9]	[Flame Enhancement LV 7]
[Destruction Enhancement LV 6]	[Cutting Enhancement LV 2]	[Piercing Enhancement LV 2]	[Impact Super-Enhancement LV 2]
[Cooperation LV 10]	[Command LV 2]	[Spatial Maneuvering LV 4]	[Hit LV 10]
[Evasion LV 10]	[Probability Super-Correction LV 5]	[Presence Perception LV 10]	[Danger Perception LV 10]
[Heat Perception LV 3]	[Flight LV 7]	[High-Speed Swimming LV 10]	[Fire Magic LV 4]
[Cutting Resistance LV]	[Piercing Resistance LV]	[Impact Super-	[Heat Nullification]

1]	1]	Resistance LV 1]	
[Status Condition	[Longevity LV 5]	[Magic Hoard LV 4]	[Instant Body LV 5]
Resistance LV 1]			
[Endurance LV 5]	[Herculean Strength LV 5]	[Sturdy LV 5]	[Monk LV 4]
	5]		
[Talisman LV 3]	[Rapid Movement LV 5]	[Gluttony LV 2]	

>

Skill Points: 30,050

Titles:

[Monster Slayer]	[Monster Slaughterer]	[Commander]	[Dragon]
[Champion]			

>

This guy suddenly pops out of the magma lake on the other side of the pit.

Yep. It's the fire dragon that Mother smacked down earlier.

Wait, so you're alive? That's crazy.

You got blown all the way over here by Mother's attack, but you somehow managed to survive?

Unreal! That's ridiculous!

This is no time to be impressed with the fire dragon's will to live!

This thing looks really mad that Mother waled on it!

Also, it's totally locked on to me!

I have nothing to do with her, okay?!

Oh, wait. She is my parent, so technically, I'm not entirely unrelated, huh?

Okay, who cares about that right now?!

Hey, this guy is faster than me!

I've been stuck in a few situations now where I haven't been able to run away for one reason or another, but this is the first time the reason is because I'm outmatched in pure speed.

I can't escape!

This means I'm gonna have to prepare for the worst.

I kick Parallel Minds up to max synchronization level.

The fire dragon and I face each other down.

To be honest, I don't know if I stand a chance.

Its stats are definitely higher than mine.

It's got an attribute advantage over me, too.

Worst of all is that Status Condition Resistance skill.

As the name implies, it increases the dragon's resistance to my condition-inflicting attacks.

On top of its already high resistance stat, it's safe to assume that this thing's defense is insanely high.

I specialize in status conditions, you know.

So that's another advantage it has over me.

And its skill list is pretty stacked, too.

I've fought plenty of monsters with higher stats than me before,

but usually, I had the advantage in the skills department.

But while I might still have a higher number of skills, this fire dragon's skills are as good or even better than mine.

Some are the same as mine, some are higher level, and some are even evolved.

So I lose in terms of stats and skills.

And as a bonus, it's got the type advantage over me.

Nevertheless, I have to do it.

If I can't win somehow, this is where I die.

I steel myself.

It's not like I have no chance of winning at all.

Thanks to Mother's attack, my opponent's HP has been reduced.

However, the odds still lean toward my defeat.

I don't intend to lose, since I'm scared of dying, but I have to accept that it's a distinct possibility.

So I guess it's time to put my words into action. I'm gonna shine like a comet until I burn away to nothing.

I don't intend to die, but if I do, I want to go out in a blaze of glory.

Do you want to kill me, fire dragon?

Then you better be ready to come at me with everything you've got.

I'm not so weak that you can take me out without so much as a scratch, you know!

As I steady my resolve, I turn on the Intimidation skill that I've been keeping off.

My Evil Eyes are at full throttle.

Activate Magic Warfare, Mental Warfare, and Wyrms Power simultaneously.

Begin constructing magic spells.

Apparently getting the message, the fire dragon covers its body with flames.

"Fire Dragon" must be the evolved form of the "Fire Wyrms" skill.

So I guess it makes sense that it can use the abilities of Fire Wyrms, too.

One of which is Flame Wrap, which is acquired at Fire Wyrms level 8.

It's an advanced version of the Fire Wyrms level-2 ability Heat Wrap, literally wreathing the user in an intense blaze.

On top of that, the heat generated increases the user's physical capabilities.

Apparently, the fire dragon recognizes me as a strong enemy that isn't to be trifled with.

Neither of us underestimates the other.

The curtain opens on a fierce, no-holds-barred battle.

The fire dragon spits a fireball.

It seems to be testing the waters rather than engaging in a serious attack.

Still, considering I'm especially weak to fire, it could easily wipe me out in one blow if I take a direct hit.

Not to mention, even this casual shot is on par with a fire wyrm's full-power fireballs.

I evade it with all my might.

Thanks to the combination of Hit and Probability Super-Correction, it's not easy to dodge.

Even the dragon's weakest attacks require every bit of my Enhancement and Evasion skills to overcome.

I have to make good use of Thought Acceleration and Foresight.

As the fire dragon spits another fireball, it starts closing the distance between us.

The fireball is just a distraction—the real attack follows close behind.

Bending its long, snakelike body, the monster whips its enormous tail at me.

This simple physical attack is augmented with the power of those flames, an effect that could easily prove fatal to me.

I narrowly avoid this attack as well.

The fire on its tail grazes my body.

That alone is enough to reduce my HP slightly.

If it weren't for Thought Acceleration giving me time to recognize the fire dragon's approach and Foresight predicting its movements, it would've been a much closer call.

For now, my Evasion combo seems to ever so slightly outmatch the fire dragon's Hit/Probability combo.

But things aren't looking good.

No matter how long I fix my Evil Eyes on it, the fire dragon isn't becoming paralyzed.

The Cursed Evil Eye is reducing its HP and SP by the tiniest amount, but it's having little effect on its stats.

Both abilities are probably butting heads with the dragon's incredibly high resistance.

With enough time, I think the Evil Eyes should still take effect, but it's not like the fire dragon is going to politely wait around until that happens.

I barely manage to avoid claws that fly at me shortly after the dragon's tail recedes.

Feeling cautious after I avoid all its attacks, the fire dragon backs off a little.

I have only two things going for me at the moment.

One is that the fire dragon isn't starting out at full health thanks to Mother's attack.

Its HP has been cut nearly in half, and while it has stocked up MP as well as SP thanks to Gluttony, those stocks have been reduced quite a bit.

And since my Cursed Evil Eye is shaving off its HP faster than its HP Rapid Recovery skill can counter, it won't be healing anymore.

The other silver lining is that it doesn't have its army.

The fire dragon's skills are mostly enhanced versions of the fire wyrm's.

Naturally, it can do anything a fire wyrm could.

Specifically, I'm thinking of the skill the fire wyrm used to back me into a corner and cause me all kinds of pain.

Command, an advanced version of the Leadership skill the fire wyrm had.

A skill that can control its minions with even greater power.

Luckily, the dragon's soldiers have all been wiped out by Mother's attack.

This is a pure one-on-one fight.

Thank you, O Great Mother!

However, even after taking all that into account, the fire dragon still has the advantage.

I fire a Poison Shot as I dodge the fire dragon's attack, but it disappears before connecting with the dragon's body.

The effect of Imperial Scales must have weakened the magic's structure before it even came into contact with the dragon's flame-covered body.

And once it did, it was weakened enough that the Flame Wrap simply evaporated it.

The fire dragon didn't need to take any evasive action. Its defenses were enough to nullify the Poison Shot either way.

This monster has attack power that means instant death for me on top of defense that won't budge from any weak attacks.

And its speed is higher than mine.

If it feels like it, the fire dragon probably could use its speed plus its Evasion and Probability Super-Correction skills to avoid Poison Shot, too.

Okay, this officially sucks.

Thanks to my Cursed Evil Eye, the dragon's HP is slowly decreasing.

But honestly, there's no way I can bring this huge number down to 0 with Evil Eyes alone.

I would collapse from exhaustion long before then.

I'm not expecting much in the way of stat decreases, either.

I mean, it is working. A little bit.

But the speed at which its stats are dropping is much slower than when I use it on other monsters.

It'll be a long time before the effects of the stat reduction are actually noticeable, too.

I'm sure I would end up dead before then.

Paralyzing Evil Eye is my best hope for a reversal.

But then again, it's probably best not to get my hopes up.

That's because the fire dragon's Status Condition Resistance skill has just gone up to level 2.

Hopefully, it had almost all the proficiency it needed already and simply got lucky. If not, then that means its resistance will go up faster than I can inflict paralysis.

I don't think it can ward off the effects completely, but it's probably too much to wish for the fire dragon to become completely paralyzed.

There goes another move I can't count on.

As I rule out more possibilities, my remaining options are getting real sparse.

The most effective possible method at this point is to clobber the dragon with enough poison to overwhelm its resistance.

My Deadly Spider Poison is the most lethal attack method of any of my skills.

Even with Status Condition Resistance, I doubt it could get through that without a scratch.

But one hit probably won't be enough to do it in.

I can't just throw a lucky punch and hope for the best.

I need to be absolutely sure my attacks will hit dead-on.

But Flame Wrap poses a problem.

That fire is so fierce that it whittled down my HP by grazing me.

I have to break through that somehow, or I won't be able to hit with enough firepower.

My attacks will just burn up, and me along with them.

Even as my thoughts race, my body brain keeps desperately avoiding the fire dragon's effects.

It's so intense that I give up on attacking completely and concentrate on dodging.

Even when the magic brain counterattacks with spells, the combo of Imperial Scales and Flame Wrap brushes them right off.

Even Poison Fog, which I used to massacre so many monsters in the battle against the fire wyrm, would be useless here.

The fire dragon leaps into the air.

Seeing that, I quickly adjust my Poison Synthesis settings.

Almost immediately afterward, flames burst out from the fire dragon's mouth.

An immense breath attack torches the ground.

It's Inferno Breath, a level-10 Fire Dragon ability.

This wide-range destructive force blows away the nearby earth, melting it and turning the area into a new magma ocean.

I jump in the nick of time, invoking Weak Poison with Poison Synthesis at the same time.

I synthesize the largest amount I can and take shelter inside the giant blob of poison.

Since I set the damage points to the minimum, my HP doesn't take much damage.

The moment I entered the poison ball and the moment the breath attack covered the ground were more or less at the same exact time.

The aftermath alone begins to evaporate the weak poison.

Even though I wasn't hit directly, my HP still drops.

I stretch a thread up to the ceiling and frantically escape before the poison evaporates completely.

Then I flee along the ceiling without looking back.

Naturally, the fire dragon chases after me, but at least I escaped the newly formed magma.

A fireball is bearing down on me.

Kicking off the ceiling, I drop into the air just as the fireball impacts the spot where I was only moments ago.

Thrown into open space, my body is pulled toward the ground by gravity.

As if it was waiting for that moment, the fire dragon swoops in with its fangs bared.

I pull on the thread I attached to the ceiling, thin enough that the dragon would have difficulty seeing it.

At the same time, I synthesize Deadly Spider Poison imbued with the Paralysis effect.

The fire dragon passes directly beneath me.

Then it goes into a tailspin in midair.

The instant the dragon's mouth closes, my enhanced vision sees it twist its body to narrowly avoid swallowing the poison.

My bait-and-switch poison strategy, which has ushered so many Middle Stratum monsters into their graves, has been defeated.

At least it bought me enough time to get back down to the ground.

But that was a big mistake.

The spot I land on is surrounded by magma, with nowhere to run.

I'm a perfect sitting duck for the fire dragon.

It wasn't just attacking me with Inferno Breath. There was a

deeper strategy that involved destroying the ground itself to change the flow of the magma.

No matter where I turn, there's nowhere to go except up above me, where the fire dragon has righted itself and is hurtling straight toward me.

I can see in its eyes that it won't let me escape.

I'm trapped on all sides.

The fire dragon unleashes another Inferno Breath.

Roaring flames engulf my entire body without the slightest resistance.

Then, just like that, my body burns up into nothing, evaporating without leaving so much as ash.



Hyrince has returned.

I just found out yesterday.

I was eager to talk to him right away, but there's a time and place for everything.

It took a while before Hyrince could meet with me.

I was so anxious about it yesterday, I couldn't sit still.

Today, I can finally speak to Hyrince face-to-face.

I'm waiting on the edge of my seat in the room where we agreed to meet.

"Looks like I've kept you waiting awhile."

Hyrince enters the room at last.

He looks a bit thinner than the burly man I remember.

"Shun...I'm sorry!"

Hyrince bows his head deeply.

"Julius shouldn't have been the one to die. He should've survived, not me."

"What do you mean...?"

I can barely speak, my mouth running dry.

"It was this..."

"What is it?"

Hyrince holds out a tattered red feather.

"It's a phoenix feather. An item that makes the holder temporarily invincible."

"What happened exactly?"

"It was the hero, Julius, who was supposed to have it. But he said it would be better for me to have it, since I'm the tank, so he gave it to me..."

"You mean..."

"Yeah. I'm only alive because of this item. It's lost its effect now, but...Julius should have been the one to have it, not me. Julius was the one who should've survived."

Hyrince lowers his head again as if in penitence.

"Hyrince, please raise your head. There's no reason for you to apologize."

“No, I...”

“Hyrince, I’m sure my brother forced you to take it against your will, didn’t he? I bet he said something like, ‘I’m not going to die—don’t worry.’”

“Ha-ha... You really are his brother. That’s exactly right.”

Hyrince looks up with a bitter smile.

“‘I’m not going to die. Since you’re our shield user, your chances of dying are much higher, right? So it’s better if you take it, Hyrince.’ No matter how much I argued with him, he refused to take it.”

My lips wobble at Hyrince’s horrible imitation.

Steadying myself, I force out the words I need to ask.

“Hyrince, please tell me...about my brother’s last moments.”

“All right.”

Hyrince straightens up.

He sits facing me across the table.

“But just so you know, I might not be able to tell you much. It pains me to admit it, but I didn’t understand much of what was happening even at the time...”

And so, Hyrince tells me from start to finish about how the war broke out.

Julius and his party were guarding one of the fortresses.

Refusing to stay holed up inside, he went out to directly join the fray.

With his incredible range of combat skills, he defeated several elite members of the demon army in battle before finally entering one-on-one combat with the enemy general.

The general was strong but not as strong as my brother the hero.

Julius magnificently defeated his opponent, then advised the rest of the demon army to surrender.

“And that was when it happened. When that...thing...showed up.”

The “thing” in question was a white little girl.

“Just a pure-white girl. There’s no other way to describe it.”

The girl walked onto the battlefield as if taking a leisurely stroll.

Her eyes were closed.

“That’s the last thing I remember. Next thing I knew, I was lying on the ground. Looking back, I don’t think I was out for very long... but by the time I woke up, it was all over.”

When Hyrince came to his senses, all that remained of his friends were their clothing and equipment.

It was as if the people themselves had simply disappeared.

“I think I know what it was, though. A Rot Attack.”

“Rot Attack...”

“Yeah. They call it the attribute that governs death. Anyone hit

with a Rot Attack will become dust and perish.”

Is that kind of thing really possible?

My brother Julius was the hero, the strongest human alive.

And he was turned into dust...?

That’s impossible.

And yet, that’s exactly what Hyrince says happened in my brother’s final moments.

“I can’t believe it...”

As I sink into silence, Hyrince produces something from his pocket.

“That’s...the one my brother always wore.”

“Yeah. I don’t think he ever told you, but this was your mother’s last gift to Julius before she died.”

Hyrince hands the object to me.

It’s a pure-white scarf.

“I’m sorry. That was all I could bring back with me.”

“Not at all. Thank you very much.”

I can’t say anything else.

My vision starts to blur.

I remember the first time I saw my older brother.

I was still a baby then.

My brother came to the nursery room with a few attendants.

He kept looking between Sue and me, tears streaming from his eyes.

That was the only time I ever saw my brother cry.

He murmured something as he patted our heads, then left the room.

At the time, I didn’t know this world’s language.

So I didn’t understand my brother’s words.

Even now, I don’t know what he said.

But I think he must have come to some kind of decision at that moment.

Later, I learned that his and my mother had passed away the day before.

To be honest, knowing that my mother made this white scarf doesn’t carry that much weight for me.

I mean, I never even met my mother.

But my brother was different.

I’m sure that for him, our mother was an important person who could never be replaced.

Losing his beloved parent at a young age and learning that he had to fight as a hero...

I wonder what kind of decision my brother made in the midst of

all that suffering.

"Nice to meet you. I'm your big brother Julius. I might not look it, but I'm the hero."

I clearly remember my brother's smile that second time we met, our first real interaction.

His smile surprised me. It was so composed for a child around grade-school age.

If you include my previous life, I was theoretically the older one, but I remember thinking I could never smile like that.

It was a smile that seemed to be hiding something deep underneath.

"You're pretty clever, Schlain. Maybe you could be a good politician when you grow up."

"Sue, don't hang off Schlain so much."

"You've got talent with a sword, too, Schlain. How about it? Want to join me someday? Ah, Sue, don't glare at me like that. Fine, fine...you can come, too."

"Hey, Schlain. I hear you have a girlfriend now? So you call each other by nicknames and everything, huh? Can I start calling you Shun, too, then?"

"Shun. I know Sue's cute and all, but don't spoil her too much, okay?"

"Shun, our father is very kind, you know. It's simply that his position as a king comes before his family. He's doing his best to fulfill his duties to his kingdom. Try to understand, okay?"

"Shun, if anything happens, just talk to Leston. He's always in the castle anyway. He's got the most time on his hands of anyone in our family, so I'm sure he'll help you out."

"That's just how our eldest brother is. He might've lost sight of himself a little bit, but he still cares about our kingdom just as much as I do. There's nothing to worry about."

"If you ask me, Hyrince is getting to the age where he should be thinking about marrying and carrying on his bloodline. But I've never heard him mention it, so I'm a little worried... Me? If I got married, I wouldn't be able to give my spouse anything in return. Why marry if it'd just make both parties unhappy?"

"My master? Yeah, that person's not human."

"Heh-heh-heh. With my Evasion skill, your snowballs will never hit me — Oof! Hey, Sue, that's against the rules! Ow, ow... Sue! That's not snow! I told you, no throwing rocks! You'll hurt someone!"

"The hero is humanity's greatest hope. So I won't ever lose. I swear it."

Memories of Julius flood my mind.

My older brother was always smiling.

A smile so full of kindness that it brought peace of mind to all who saw it.

To me, my brother will always be the hero.

Am I really supposed to succeed him in that role?

I don't know if I can do it.

But I can't abandon the goal my brother was pursuing just because I don't have confidence in myself.

"A dream's a good thing to have. Some people might laugh at you or say it's impossible. But all you have to do is keep chasing your own goal. A world where everyone can laugh and live in peace... I'll keep on chasing that ideal, even until the day I die."

I know I can be naive.

But my brother was even more so.

Still, I want to carry on those naive ideals.

I doubt I'll ever become as good a hero as Julius was.

I can't fight purely for world peace like he did.

Half my motivation comes from fulfilling the obligations that come with the Hero title.

But now, I think the other half comes from my true feelings.

"Shun...no, Hero Schlain."

Hyrince speaks to me in a different tone.

"I wasn't able to protect Julius. I'm a failure as a shield. But if you can settle for such a pathetic tank, please allow me to serve as the shield bearer for the new hero."

"Hyrince..."

"Since I couldn't protect Julius, let me protect you instead."

"Thank you, Hyrince. I would be honored to work with you."

Hyrince and I exchange a firm handshake.

Instead of trying to save the world, I'm carrying on my brother's will to do so.

No true hero would think that way, I'm sure.

I'm nothing but an impure imitation of my brother Julius.

But that's all right.

This is how I've found my resolve as a hero.

Even Hyrince doesn't know the identity of the "white girl" who defeated my brother.

Apparently, no one has ever seen her in any previous battles.

Hyrince speculated that she could be a very high-ranking demon who usually doesn't participate in combat.

Or that she might even be the Demon Lord herself.

If so, as the new hero, I'll have to face her someday.

Even if that's not the case, I still won't be running away from her.

My brother, the hero, was a wonderful person who pursued his ideals.

Crumbling into dust is definitely not an ending he deserved.

I'm sure his last moments were full of regret that he was killed before he could accomplish his goals.

Or maybe he didn't even have time to think about that.

Just like Hyrince passed out with no idea of what was going on, my brother might have died before he realized what was happening.

I want to clear away those regrets.

More than anything, I know I can never forgive that girl.

"So it might still be some time before you begin work as the hero?"

"Yeah. The Church still needs to determine the new saint, so I think it won't be until after that stuff gets set up."

"I see."

"Sue...I'm sure you know this, but once I start working as the hero, we can't be by each other's sides like we always used to be."

"Mm-hmm. I knew you would say that."

"I'm sorry."

"No need to apologize. I am not a child anymore."

"Right. You're a strong adult, I know that. But I can't bring you with me. I don't want to put you in danger."

"I know."

"It's selfish of me, I know. I'm sorry."

"As I said, you don't need to apologize."

"Okay. You should just keep enjoying yourself at the academy until graduation. You'll be safe there."

"I suppose."

"Even when I do start working as the hero, I'll try to see you whenever I can. Just like Julius did."

"Brother, are you going to try to avenge Julius?"

"Yeah. I don't know if I can, but I have to try."

"Either way, I don't think you need to worry about that for a while."

"What makes you say that?"

"You'll know soon enough."

"I see... All right. I'll try not to think about that for now."

"Good."

"All right, I'd better go. Good night."

"Very well. Good-bye, Brother."



Interlude

THE HERO'S MASTER

It is time for my daily magic power control practice.

I cycle the magical energy through my body. Refining it, increasing its density.

However, I have been unable to concentrate well of late, so the circulation is imperfect.

In these past few years, I have felt no small amount of impediment due to my age, but this current condition stems from a different cause.

“Master. There’s still a lot of postwar work to be done, so please don’t slip away on me now! And please get rid of all that crazy magic power! Are you trying to blow this whole place off the map?!”

One of my particularly fussy students has discovered me.

“I am a mage not a secretary, you know.”

“Mage or not, you are in the service of the court, so at least write a document or two once in a while, please!”

“Do not speak such foolishness. A master’s job is the job of his disciples. You are a mage of the court as well, so surely you can take care of such matters on your own?”

“You’re the one saying foolish stuff, old man. As the Renxandt Empire’s head court mage, you can’t slack off.”

My fool disciple lifts up my body, still in a meditating position, carrying me away against my will.

Where is your respect for your master?

Truly, such an imbecile I have for a disciple.

“Master. You wouldn’t be thinking something rude about me right now, would you?”

“If you realize that, then you must surely realize your actions are deserving of unkind thoughts. This is good. You may be a fool, but at least you are an observant fool.”

“You just wanted to call me a fool, didn’t you?”

My foolish disciple sighs dramatically.

“All my disciples are fools. The fool who comes crying to me over paperwork. The fool who becomes a commanding officer despite lacking any motivation. The fool who fails to understand magic yet pretends to be an adult. I have shed my heart’s blood to teach you all,

yet not one of you fools has surpassed me yet.”

“Well, sure. You’re the strongest mage in the world, aren’t you, Master? We can’t really surpass that very easily.”

“Harrumph! ‘Strongest mage in the world,’ indeed. The strongest human mage, perhaps. But there are those in this world who far surpass me in power. That master, for example...”

The image of the one whose mastery of the occult was beyond understanding is still clearly etched in my mind.

I have never once forgotten the divine appearance of the person whose power approached godhood.

There are some creatures in this world, like that master, who would likely never be surpassed by mere humans.

“What? No way. There can’t be any creatures that surpass you, Master! You didn’t even break a sweat defeating that demon general, remember?”

True enough, in the war when all those demons attacked at once, I was able to take down their commander.

However, this brings me little pride.

“Demons are just humans with a little more hair. Pathetic. Humans and demons, crushed together in one tiny vessel. We do not understand how small and insignificant our lives truly are.”

After seeing that master, I find little distinction between humans and demons.

It can be said that demons boast stronger stats than humans, but from my point of view, the difference is virtually insignificant.

“Master. I know I’ve said this before, but don’t say things like that to anyone but us, all right? You are free to admire that master and debase yourself if you really wish, but you remain the strongest mage.”

“Yes, of that I am well aware.”

“I hope so. You talk about that master to anyone who will listen, it seems. There are some elder folk who were directly hurt by it, so please try to refrain from mentioning it, all right?”

“As I said, I understand. Do not trouble me with such mundane concerns.”

“In fact, you yourself were near fatally injured back then, were you not? I have a hard time understanding how you could still admire it in spite of all that.”

“I was conceited back then. But that master truly opened my eyes to the fact that there is always someone stronger than oneself. I became aware of the smallness of my existence. I am thankful from the bottom of my heart for my encounter with that master.”

It was sixteen years ago when I met that master, while I was at the peak of my confidence.

I truly believed I was the strongest in all the world and that I had truly mastered magic.

But that encounter neatly shattered my overgrown ego.

"I was a fool back then. So anyone who cannot share my enlightenment now is a fool as well."

"Yes, yes."

My foolish disciple is barely listening now.

"Especially foolish are the disciples who cannot understand this and die before me."

Several of my disciples were killed in this battle. Mere children, far younger than I.

Among them was my fool disciple who was manipulated into misjudging his own abilities by the title of Hero, and thus hastened his own death.

The fool disciple who held the naive desire to save the entire world with his meager skills.

Saving something so large can be accomplished only if one is willing to become, perhaps, a god.

A single individual can save only so many, no matter how strong they might be.

We must focus on trying to save what is visible to us, and no more.

That is the most we mere humans can hope for.

But that fool disciple never understood that, even in the end.

Why do I go on trying to teach these foolish disciples?

Only in the hopes of giving them the power to protect themselves, if nothing else.

But as soon as they gain even a little power, they also grow arrogant.

They believe they can save others, and in the end, they cannot even protect themselves.

"Disturbing my concentration during magical power practice is already insolent enough. Fool disciples should never die before their master."

The fool disciple carrying me makes no response to my doleful murmur.



DRAGON SLAYER

The battle over, the fire dragon looks down at the magma sea it created.

Its monster lackeys are present, but no sign of the spider.

The monsters from its army have Heat Nullification, but the spider definitely didn't.

There's no way it could have survived a direct hit from the fire dragon's strongest breath attack.

That's what you think, idiot!

A giant blob of poison appears above the fire dragon.

This poison is nothing like the Weak Poison I wrapped myself in before.

It's my lethal Deadly Spider Poison, mixed with the maximum amount of Paralysis.

The deadly poison lands a direct hit on the dragon, its defenses down after seeing an apparent victory.

The huge glob of poison breaks through the Flame Wrap and bites into the dragon's body.

That's when I throw in a full-powered scythe attack!

The perfectly timed blow lands right in the gap where the flames have been momentarily extinguished by the deadly poison.

I pour all my strength into that one attack.

It's a double combo of Deadly Poison Attack and Rot Attack!

The Rot Attack shreds the dragon's hard scales while the poison sinks deep into its body.

My ultimate physical attack is pretty amazing, if I do say so myself.

The fire dragon lets loose a roar of pain and falls into the magma.

I quickly pull myself back up to the ceiling with my thread.

I'm sure the fire dragon was convinced it saw me die.

It must be pretty confused right about now.

But the particulars of how I survived are simple.

For starters, I didn't get hit by that breath attack.

In fact, I never came down from the ceiling in the first place.

This play was made possible by the Heretic Magic level-6 spell:

Phantasm.

It's one of the trump cards I've been hanging on to.

Phantasm is basically a spell that creates hallucinations.

I used the dragon's momentary panic when it was about to swallow the poison I synthesized to cast the spell on it.

Without an opportunity like that, Heretic Magic could've been easily dispelled by Imperial Scales combined with the fire dragon's high resistance.

To the fire dragon, it must have looked like I dropped to the ground, but I actually just kept clinging to the ceiling.

Then, when it let its guard down thinking the battle was over, I swooped in with the surprise attack.

Even a fire dragon is bound to take a lot of damage from my strongest physical attack.

For a moment, I consider using Phantasm to escape.

But I can't bring myself to run away again.

Sure, I've spent a lot of time in my life as a spider just running away.

But if I keep that up, I'll be no different from when I ran away from the humans who burned down my home.

To live with pride.

That's the goal I swore I would attain.

But I haven't truly regained my pride, even after all this time.

I can't go on like that.

I am the Ruler of Pride, after all.

I have to live up to that title by living as proudly as I can.

So I won't run away.

As long as I have the slightest chance of winning, no matter how slim that chance might be, I'll never give up.

I'm going to defeat this dragon.

And in doing so, I'll say good-bye to the weakling I was before.

That's right. I'm better than some irritating dragon.

...?

"Irritating"?

Say what?

I thought I was afraid of the earth dragon. Since when do I think of it as "irritating"?

Huh?

Where is this feeling coming from?

Well, that doesn't matter right now.

I may have landed a huge hit, but I'm still at a disadvantage here.

I mean, my HP is at 1 now.

I'm surviving only because of Perseverance.

The dragon was whittling down my HP for a while, but the

blowback from my big attack was the last nail in the coffin.

Rot Attack is very strong, but it comes at a price.

And that's not the only damage I took just now.

Even after being extinguished by my poison, the Flame Wrap still inflicted damage on me.

I still have some MP left.

Which means I'm not going to die just yet.

But a single hit from any one of the fire dragon's attacks is probably enough to do me in.

My decisive strike definitely did a number on the fire dragon, but it's still got some strength left.

Avoiding the magma, I land on the ground for real this time.

The fire dragon is still sinking into the magma.

Now's my chance.

I activate my second trump card, the one I've been preparing since this battle began.

My MP decreases at an alarming speed.

In my current situation, every point of MP lost means a point closer to death.

But activating this magic is worth the cost.

Don't you agree, magic brain number one and number two?

「Sure do!」

「Count on it!」

See, my Parallel Minds skill leveled up, so I've got a new friend: magic brain number two!

Now I've got double the brainpower for invoking magic.

Magic brain number two has been preparing this spell all this time, and now it's ready to use, thanks to the help of magic brain number one.

Now I open thee, Hell Gate!

Immediately, the whole area goes dark.

Even the glow of the magma is swallowed up by the intense darkness rising from the ground.

It's as if the darkness of hell itself is seeping into this world from below.

It engulfs the magma, the ground, the enormous fire dragon.

The overflowing darkness swallows everything.

Abyss Magic level 1: Hell Gate.

An extremely dark and powerful magic that heralds the opening of hell.

That's what I unleashed into this world.

The darkness engulfs everything, converges, and abruptly absorbs back into the ground and disappears.

As if it were sealed away.

As if the gates of hell had closed shut once more.
All that remains is the beaten, battered fire dragon and me.
Seriously?

You survived that?

But the fire dragon has precious little HP remaining.

And its MP and SP are virtually gone.

It must have converted them into HP with the help of its skills.

That's the only way it could possibly have survived Hell Gate.

My own MP is rather low after using Hell Gate, too.

I'm in pretty rough shape myself.

Basically, both of us are struggling to stay on our feet.

The next blow will decide the victor.

The fire dragon's chosen attack is also its most primitive one.

Namely, a body slam.

Yeah. It's a good choice.

With virtually no MP or SP, it's the fire dragon's most effective means of attack.

And given its enormous size and stats, it should be the winning move.

If it were up against anyone else, that is.

I'm a spider.

What is a spider's greatest weapon?

Poison? Claws? Fangs?

No, none of the above.

The fire dragon's body stops.

It's hit my Utility Thread, imbued with Fire Resistance.

Even with that resistance, of course, I can use it for only a moment in the Middle Stratum.

But that's all I need.

With its Flame Wrap gone, my thread can stop the fire dragon, even if only for a few seconds.

In that short amount of time, I swing down my scythe.

One of them was destroyed when I used Rot Attack before, but I still have one more left.

And it's that scythe that strikes the fire dragon with all my strength.

<Experience has reached the required level. Individual Zoa Ele has increased from LV 15 to LV 16.>

<All basic attributes have increased.>

<Skill proficiency level-up bonus acquired.>

<Proficiency has reached the required level. Skill [Spatial Maneuvering LV 9] has become [Spatial Maneuvering LV 10].>

<Condition satisfied. Skill [Spatial Maneuvering LV 10] has evolved into skill [Dimensional Maneuvering LV 1].>

<Skill points acquired.>

<Experience has reached the required level. Individual Zoa Ele has increased from LV 16 to LV 17.>
<All basic attributes have increased.>
<Skill proficiency level-up bonus acquired.>
<Proficiency has reached the required level. Skill [Rot Attack LV 1] has become [Rot Attack LV 2].>
<Skill points acquired.>

<Experience has reached the required level. Individual Zoa Ele has increased from LV 17 to LV 18.>
<All basic attributes have increased.>
<Skill proficiency level-up bonus acquired.>
<Proficiency has reached the required level. Skill [Evasion LV 9] has become [Evasion LV 10].>
<Condition satisfied. Skill [Probability Correction LV 1] has been derived from skill [Evasion LV 10].>
<Skill points acquired.>

<Experience has reached the required level. Individual Zoa Ele has increased from LV 18 to LV 19.>
<All basic attributes have increased.>
<Skill proficiency level-up bonus acquired.>
<Proficiency has reached the required level. Skill [Hit LV 9] has become [Hit LV 10].>
<Condition satisfied. Skill [Probability Correction LV 1] has been derived from skill [Hit LV 10].>
<Skill [Probability Correction LV 1] has been integrated into [Probability Correction LV 1].>
<Proficiency has reached the required level. Skill [Utility Thread LV 1] has become [Utility Thread LV 2].>
<Skill points acquired.>

<Condition satisfied. Acquired title [Dragon Slayer].>
<Acquired skills [Lifeblood LV 1] [Dragon Power LV 1] as a result of title [Dragon Slayer].>
<Skill [Longevity LV 1] has been integrated into [Lifeblood LV 1].>
<Skill [Wyrm Power LV 3] has been integrated into [Dragon Power LV 1].>

The Divine Voice (temp.) resounds, and the stats disappear from the fire dragon's Appraisal display, its name changing to "Fire Dragon Corpse."

Only when I see that do I finally exhale.

My status has been fully recovered with the consecutive level-ups, but mentally, I'm still exhausted.

Once again, it was another tightrope walk of a battle.

The fact that I won seems like something of a miracle.

I mean, any one of that fire dragon's attacks could've killed me in one hit.

Just a graze or an aftershock was enough to put me on the verge of death, y'know?

If it hit me straight on, I'd be dead, Perseverance be damned.

Also, if Parallel Minds hadn't leveled up right before I ran into the fire dragon, I would've been in big trouble.

Now, I have two magic brains.

That's the only reason I was able to use Abyss Magic, which I could never get to work before.

Actually, to be honest, that was my first time even trying it.

I mean, I gathered from its structure that it was some kind of wide-range annihilation-type magic, but frankly, I'm still a little freaked out by how destructive it was.

Checking out the area, I can tell the ground in a three-hundred-foot radius around me has sunk about fifteen feet lower.

The area where the darkness all converged and got sucked in at the end has become an especially deep hole.

Staring into the opening with Appraisal, I see it's so deep that it goes outside my detection range.

Does this go through the Middle Stratum right into the Lower Stratum?

I guess I don't even know if the Lower Stratum is below this area.

Well, looking at this hole, I wouldn't be surprised if it really does go straight down to hell.

I guess it's not called Hell Gate for nothing.

I still can't believe the fire dragon was able to survive that, but I guess it was simply that strong of an opponent.

Well, thanks to that, my level went way up.

Ahhh, but...only up to level 19, huh?

If I just went up one more level, I would've been able to evolve now.

So close.

...Oh, crap.

【What is it, information brain?】

Since our Abyss Magic made the ground sink, magma is starting to flow into it.

『What? For real?』

Yeah, like actually.

Body brain, let's grab that fire dragon and get out of here before the magma floods this place.

【We're taking that huge thing with us?!】

Of course we are, duh.

【Yikes. Don't blame me if we get sore.】

And so, I laboriously escape with the enormous fire dragon corpse in tow.

The magma isn't moving particularly quickly, but since transporting the fire dragon takes so much time and effort, it ends up being a pretty close call.

Any longer, and we both would've met our ends in the magma.

I know, I know—why didn't I just leave the fire dragon, then? But

after all the pains I went to defeating it, it would be downright rude not to eat the thing!

Defeat, eat, and thank you very much!

It's a package deal, dude!

Whew.

Anyway, body brain, you know the drill. De-scaling time, please.

【Wooo. Lucky me.】

Guess it's time for my usual skill check.

All right, let me see here.

It's important to make sure I thoroughly investigate every skill.

Really, really important.

Why, you ask?

Because I didn't realize you could imbue Utility Thread with resistances until now!

God, I don't even wanna talk about this.

I'm such an idiot.

Why would I overlook something so vital?

One of Utility Thread's effects is Resistance Conferment. As the name implies, it lets me add the effects of any of my resistance skills to my thread.

And that includes Fire Resistance.

There'd be no point in adding things like Poison Resistance to my thread, obviously, but Acid Resistance, for instance, would make dealing with frogs way easier.

I didn't even notice this Resistance Conferment thing until I was randomly checking through my skills one day.

Talk about a surprise.

I was excited to learn about this effect, sure, but I also couldn't believe how careless I'd been to miss it in the first place.

Ugh, if I'd known about this sooner, I might've been able to use my thread more often!

Still, even adding Fire Resistance doesn't do much to stop it from burning easily, so I guess it wouldn't have made that dramatic a difference.

It sure ended up saving my ass this time, though.

And that's why I'm taking the time to look over my new titles and skills.

Man, dragons really are something else.

I can't believe you can get a title like this just by defeating a single one.

So what does it do exactly?

<Dragon Slayer: Acquires skills [Lifeblood LV 1] [Dragon Power LV 1]. Acquisition condition: Defeat a dragon-type monster. Effect: Increase in damage to wyrm- and dragon-type opponents. Explanation: A title awarded to those who bring down a dragon.>

Looks like an advanced version of Wyrmslayer, then.

The skills are the same sort, too.

<Lifeblood: Adds to HP by 100x the number of the skill level. Additionally, growth of this stat at each level-up increases by 10x the skill level.>

<Dragon Power: Temporarily gain the power of a dragon>

Sweet!

Finally, a skill to compensate for my low HP!

I guess Perseverance does help with that, but really, the ideal situation is to have lots of HP in the first place.

For one, there are times like this last fight when I need all my MP for its intended purpose.

Aw, but I think I leveled up before I got that skill, so that's four levels' worth of bonus HP lost.

If only title acquisition came before the level-up process, I could've done even better for myself in the growth department...

Oh well, nothing I can do about that.

Dragon Power is probably the advanced form of Wyrms Power, right?

That would make it a simple temporary status enhancement skill, which means I'll have to test out how big the difference is.

This stuff is important. Very important.

I never had a chance to experiment with Abyss Magic, so it ended up being a bit of a trial by fire, but on the whole, I really need to make sure I know exactly what all my skills do.

Ahhh... Abyss Magic.

Really, I should test out what the higher Abyss Magic spells do, but...this stuff is no joke.

I mean, even the level-1 spell was powerful enough to permanently alter the terrain!

So what in the world would even higher levels do?

I have to be careful about wasting MP, too, so it's not the kind of magic I should be casually throwing around.

No matter how huge it might be, this is still an underground labyrinth. The last thing I need is to cause a cave-in because of some Abyss Magic misfire.

At the moment, given how terrifyingly powerful level 1 was, I'm a little scared to try anything above that.

Unless I run into an enemy so strong that Hell Gate alone won't be enough, I think I'll avoid using Abyss Magic level 2 and up, until I get out of the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

Anyway, other than that, a few skills evolved or made new derivations when I leveled up.

Evasion and Hit both created Probability Correction.

And Spatial Maneuvering evolved into Dimensional Maneuvering.

I've seen Probability Correction before, on the eels and stuff.

Really, I guess I suspected this might be how the derivation would go, based on the skill organizations of the eel and its evolutionary line.

Both Evasion and Hit reached their max level, so now I just have to keep improving Probability Correction.

That should improve my evasion and hit ratios as well.

Maybe this skill will even improve my luck in general?

Let's take a moment to pray for that.

I'd like to have a more peaceful life from here on out, please.

Okay, moving on.

Now, I'm curious what the difference between Spatial Maneuvering and its evolved form, Dimensional Maneuvering, might be.

Let's see...

<Dimensional Maneuvering: Allows the user to move freely through any space>

Hmm? I dunno—it sounds kinda cool, but I don't really get it.

Any space?

Like, air and stuff?

What, can I do a double jump now or something?

I'll have to test this out later, too.

A lot of skills become much more useful when they evolve, after all.

Sometimes even a skill that was useless ends up suddenly becoming very handy when it evolves, so maybe Spatial Maneuvering will be like that, too.

If I can do double jumps and stuff now, that would really increase my strategic possibilities.

I think that's about it, right?

Okay.

Overall, my skills powered up quite a bit.

I just wish I had leveled up one more time...

Then I'd get to make even bigger leaps forward.



“A dragon's been destroyed? In the Great Elroe Labyrinth... Was this his doing? No, I don't think so. We have an unspoken truce going on. I don't think he would make a move like that. But what happened, then? Activate administrator's authority... What in the world? A ruler? Of three, no less? What does this mean? I've never heard of this 'Wisdom.' Does that mean this is the work of D? But why? What is this skill? ...I guess I'll have to investigate.”



Something was wrong.

I'd had this sense of unease for a while now.

At first, it was just a vague sense at the back of my unconscious mind.

But eventually, I became fully aware of it.

Something was definitely wrong.

But I didn't know what it was.

A feeling of unease haunted me, but I couldn't put my finger on what exactly was causing it.

Even at the time, I knew I had to figure out what the source of that feeling was.

But I didn't know how much I would come to regret it if I didn't.

Summoned by my father, I go to his office.

Lately, my father has been busier than ever.

I know why, since it largely has to do with me. Apparently, the rumor that the hero is dead has spread from the battlefield and onto the streets of the kingdom.

We can't keep Julius's death a secret much longer.

So the Word of God church is going to make a formal announcement.

And at the same time, they would reveal the identity of the new hero.

In other words, the time when I'll have to stand before the people as a hero has come.

That's probably why my father wants to speak with me now.

What I don't understand is why Sue's been summoned as well.

Right now, Sue is walking by my side.

Why would he have Sue take a leave of absence from the academy to come to this meeting with me?

Apparently, Sue hasn't heard anything, either.

As I ponder this question, we arrive in front of the door.

Well, I'm sure my father will explain everything shortly.

I knock on the door.

"It's Schlain."

"Hmm? Come in."

"Thank you."

I open the door and step inside.

Sue follows me without a word.

"What is it?"

Father barely looks up from writing something on his desk.

Um, that's my line.

"You're the one who called for us, aren't you, Father? What is it you need?"

"Hmm? I didn't call for you."

Huh?

Before I knew what was happening, the situation had already begun to unfold.

I know I tried to question it aloud.

Yet the sound doesn't leave my body.

The effects of a Wind Magic spell, Silencing, wrap around me.

Someone must have constructed and loosed the spell before I had a chance to react.

But not many people are skilled enough to do something like that. One of the only possibilities I can think of is Sue, who's standing right next to me.

What's going on?

I try to speak, but the sound of the air around me quashes my voice.

The difficult thing about this spell is that, instead of just erasing my voice, it creates resistance around me that cancels out any noise I make.

As long as it's still active, unless I can forcefully interfere with the construction of the spell, my voice won't reach anyone else.

I'm already confused, but what happens next is enough to throw my mind into complete chaos.

Sue attacks Father.

My eyes widen with shock.

What's happening? Why?

The spell Sue used is Light Magic.

Magic I specialize in.

The ray of light shoots through my father's forehead.

"Aaaaaah! Brother! What are you doing?!"

As it happens, Sue suddenly shrieks.

The overwhelming confusion makes my mind go blank.

"What's going on?!"

The door flies open as my brother Cylis and his armored knight

escort charge into the room.

“Brother Schlain attacked Father!”

“He did what?! Schlain, have you gone mad?!”

No!

It wasn’t me!

Why?! What’s going on?!

But my cries only disappear without a sound.

“Guards! Schlain has attacked His Majesty!”

Cylis’s voice, on the other hand, resounds loud and clear throughout the castle.

“Seize him!”

The armored knight leaps into action.

He unsheathes his sword and swings it toward me.

Despite my confusion, my training takes over, and I automatically draw my own sword to parry the strike.

But then the attacking knight cuts my sword in two.

This can’t be happening.

Even if it wasn’t enhanced or anything, since I just pulled it out, there’s no way a sword wielded by the hero should be so easily broken.

And yet, my sword has been divided clean in half.

My thoughts can’t keep up with all these sudden developments.

The armored knight makes his move during my momentary pause.

The blade swings again and cuts into me.

I managed to take a step back at the last second, so it’s not a fatal wound.

However, the diagonal slash crossing my chest from the shoulder is still a serious injury.

If he attacks again, I’ll be killed.

“Yo. You don’t look so good, Mr. Hero.”

The armored knight scoffs at me.

His voice is muffled by his helmet, but it’s still unmistakable.

“You... Hugo...?”

“That’s right.”

The knight takes off his helmet.

Sure enough, it’s Hugo. I thought he lost all his skills and ran off somewhere.

“Hugo. Don’t go giving yourself away like that.”

“C’mon, why not? I wanted him to get a good look at me before he dies.”

My brother Cylis appears to have known exactly who was in the suit of armor.

But why?

“You’re curious, right? See, your big brother here wants the

throne. I want revenge on you and Oka. You're a thorn in both our sides, get it?"

"But...why...? Cylis is already next in line for the throne..."

"Funny you should mention that. See, before he kicked the bucket, that stupid king was planning to make you his heir. He figured if he named you the next king before you could be declared as the hero, they wouldn't wanna send you into battle!"

"As if I would let my throne be stolen away for such a foolish reason!"

My elder brother Cylis exclaims darkly, seemingly without thinking.

Thanks to a new Silencing spell set up around us, no one else can hear his interjection.

I look to the person who must have cast the spell.

"Brother. Unfortunately, you must now die here."

Her tone is no different from how it usually is, yet her voice sounds as if it belongs to someone else entirely.

Unlike how it normally sounds, which is level but somehow still full of passion, her words are cold and full of contempt.

"Sue, why?"

"I have opened my eyes to true love, dear brother. I would do anything for the sake of that love, even if I must kill my own brother."

This isn't right.

Sue is definitely acting strangely.

I activate Appraisal.

The status conditions Hypnosis, Brainwashed, and Charmed appear.

"Hugo! Is this your doing?!"

"Oh dear. You noticed, huh? Took you long enough. Yeah, I did it. What do you think? How's it feel to have something stolen from you? Sucks, right? I should know, since the same thing happened to me! Ga-ha-ha-ha!"

"Change her back right now!"

"Like I'm gonna do that just 'cause you asked nicely? What a moron."

My vision turns red.

Dropping my broken sword, I charge at Hugo and knock him off his feet.

Blood drips from my open wound, but Auto-Recovery should take care of that.

"Oof! How do you still have so much strength?!"

Hugo groans and raises his sword.

In response, I start casting a spell to counter him.

"Oh? He's got more fight in him than I expected."

My magic composition dissipates.

At the same moment, I suddenly feel a horribly powerful presence behind me that I didn't detect at all before.

"?!"

I quickly roll to one side.

It's not any conscious thought that makes me do it. My body just reacts automatically due to fear.

Standing up, I look at the source of this sensation.

It's a girl who looks to be around my age.

Her skin is white as death, her eyes bloodred, and her features as beautiful as a princess from a picture book.

But her ominous aura contradicts that appearance.

I immediately use Appraisal.

<Appraisal blocked>

I've never seen this result before.

A skill that interferes with Appraisal?

Does that really exist?

I've definitely never heard of it.

But the fact that I can't Appraise her is proof enough that this is no ordinary girl.

I wish I knew more, but there's no doubt she's a formidable enemy.

"Sophia! This one's mine! Don't go stickin' your nose where it don't belong!"

"Oh really? Looked like he was beating you up to me."

Judging by their interactions, it doesn't seem like this "Sophia" girl is being brainwashed by Hugo.

Is she working with him toward some common goal, then, like Cylis?

"Enough! Stop arguing and finish Schlain off quickly!"

At Cylis's beckoning, Hugo and Sue turn their attention back toward me.

Sophia alone ignores Cylis's words, instead flashing a meaningful smile.

"I won't let you!"

At that very moment, the tiny frame of an elf cuts in.

A powerful blast of wind hits Hugo and sends him flying.

"Oookaaaaa!!!"

With a roar of fury, Hugo tries to stand up, but Ms. Oka fires another spell at him.

However, the spell evaporates into nothing as soon as it hits Sophia, who's now standing in front of Hugo as if to protect him.

Can she erase magic, like what happened to my spell before?

I thought only wyrms and dragons had skills like that.

“Y-you?!”

When she sees Sophia, her eyes widen with shock.

“Shun! Run for it!”

Ms. Oka smashes the floor with Wind Magic, throwing dust everywhere to hinder the enemy.

“But!”

I can’t just leave Sue in Hugo’s control and run away!

“No buts! We have to withdraw for now!”

I don’t think I’ve ever heard Ms. Oka sound this agitated before.

Is that girl Sophia really that dangerous?

Ms. Oka seems to know her, based on her reaction.

When I hesitate nonetheless, someone grabs my hand.

“Hyrince?”

“Leston told me you were in danger, so I came running. I’m sure you’re confused, but we just have to get you out of here for now.”

With that, Hyrince takes off running and pulls me along, so I reluctantly follow.

Ms. Oka’s magic blows away a guard who charges toward us.

All over the place, I see soldiers fighting one another.

“What in the world is going on?”

“It’s a rebellion.”

“A rebellion?”

“Yes. Hugo and Prince Cylis are the ones behind it. But they’re planning to blame it on you and make it look as if they’re the ones who quelled the rebellion.”

My teacher’s explanation makes my blood run cold.

“Leston’s forces are fighting them right now. He’s buying time so that we can get you out of here.”

With that, we flee from the castle.

After our escape, we arrive at a lone mansion.

“Leston is supposed to meet us here. Once he arrives, we’ll leave the kingdom.”

“Ms. Oka, wait! We have to do something about Hugo, or Sue will...!”

“We can’t.”

“But, Ms. Oka, if we can stop Hugo, this whole thing should blow over. We have to go back and catch him...”

“No.”

“Ms. Oka!”

“The Church has announced the new hero. His name is Hugo Baint Renxandt.”

“Huh?!”

“Even the Church is cooperating with him.”

I can't help but stumble.

Hyrince offers a shoulder to prop me up.

"Do the elves have any idea why the Church would be complicit in such an absurd plot?"

"It's safe to assume that Hugo's brainwashing has reached within the Church."

"Impossible. The effects of Brainwashing are only temporary. It's not powerful enough to incite a situation like this, is it?"

"Usually, no. But there is one exception."

"An exception?"

"One of the top-tier Seven Deadly Sins-class skills, Lust. Its brainwashing effect is far more powerful than any other skill can induce. I have no doubt that Hugo now holds this skill."

The Seven Deadly Sins?

Does something like that really exist?

I've never seen anything like that on my list of acquirable skills.

Which means they must be highly unusual skills that can't be acquired even with 100,000 skill points.

"At any rate, we have no way of knowing how far Hugo's influence has spread. It's best to assume that this entire kingdom has been lost."

"That can't be..."

I'm speechless.

The entire kingdom is lost?

The kingdom that my father ruled, that my brother Julius loved so dearly?

"I can't let that happen. That's all the more reason we can't simply let Hugo go! If we do something about him now, we might still be able to stop this in time!"

"No!"

Ms. Oka cuts down my sliver of hope with a sharp voice.

"As long as Sophia is there, we have no chance of winning."

Ms. Oka's expression is bitter as she speaks.

I can't believe she would say something like that without even trying to put up a fight.

Just who or what is that girl named Sophia?

"Teacher, who in the world is she?"

"Sophia is..."

Just as Ms. Oka starts to explain, the door bursts open.

Along with my brother Leston, two familiar faces enter.

"Shun, are you hurt?"

"Your Highness, it's good to see you again."

"You've grown into a fine young man, Your Highness."

Leston is flanked by Anna and Klevea, two women who used to be

maids for Sue and me.

Anna has been helping Fei level up, so I've seen her once in a while, but I haven't seen Klevea since we left for school.

Compared with Anna, whose youthful appearance is preserved by her part-elf blood, Klevea looks considerably older.

And yet, it seems she's come running to my aid in my time of need.

But all I feel is despair.

"You too, Anna?"

"Pardon?"

"You're under Hugo's control, too!"

When I Appraised Anna, I saw the Hypnosis, Brainwashed, and Charmed statuses clearly.

At the same time as my shout, Anna's eyes narrow.

She begins constructing magic at a high speed.

I interrupt her, striking her with the side of my hand to knock her unconscious.

While I'm at it, I try to use Healing Magic to cancel out the status conditions.

But the letters describing her altered state refuse to disappear.

"Dammit! Not Anna, too!"

Leston clenches his fist in frustration.

"Shit. We're surrounded."

At Hyrince's words, I look outside the house to see a large crowd of soldiers.

"We'll have to force our way through."

All of us nod at Ms. Oka's statement.

"Shun, use my sword."

Leston passes me a weapon.

"What's this?"

"It's a divine sword handed down through the royal family. Since you're the hero, I think it's better if you use it. It's outside my expertise anyway."

"All right. Thank you."

I accept the sword and lift up the unconscious Anna.

"Let's go!"

We charge out into the encirclement, with Hyrince leading the way.

At the same time, Leston's hidden troops launch a surprise attack.

"Now!"

We push our way through the besieging forces.

Hyrince, who protected the hero Julius for so long, and Ms. Oka, who's traveled around the world to track down her reincarnated students.

Even the royal guard doesn't stand a chance of stopping us.
We beat back the soldiers, cutting a path in the crowd.
But when we break through, another unit is waiting for us.
And leading them...

"Shun. You don't know when to give up, do you?"

"Katia..."

My best friend from my previous life stands in my way.



FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH AN ADMINISTRATOR

Since gaining those levels netted me 200 skill points, it's time to pick up a new Evil Eye skill.

This time, I'm going with Heavy Evil Eye.

It increases the effect of gravity on any target in my field of vision.

Now I can slow my opponent's movements with Heavy Evil Eye, weaken them with Cursed Evil Eye, and finally seal their movements completely with Paralyzing Evil Eye.

My triple-threat Evil Eye combo is complete!

This whole arrangement is based on the goal of stopping my enemies in their tracks.

I already have plenty of other moves for attacking.

If I have to, I can always pick up some magic skill or other for 100 points.

Huh? Why don't I just do that in the first place, you ask?

I've gotten a little obsessed with the whole Evil Eye thing, but if my stats are anything to go by, I think I'm supposed to specialize in magic?

Does that mean I should really be focusing on only magic skills in the first place?

C'mon, that's not true.

At least, let's say it isn't.

I'm definitely not getting hung up on this simply because I like the idea of having eight different Evil Eyes at once.

I'm not, okay?

Anyway, I'll be saving the rest of these points for a while.

I don't know how many more I'll get as an evolutionary bonus.

I'll adjust my strategy based on that as I go on.

If I get a really big amount, I might even be able to aim for skills that've been too expensive to get so far, like Sloth.

Aaanyway.

Its usefulness in any kind of battle isn't the only reason I picked

Heavy Evil Eye.

Now, let's test this out. Evil Eye Activate!

【Oof! What're you doing, information brain?!】

What do you mean, what? I'm increasing my own gravity.

【It's heavy!】

Well, I was thinking. What is it I lack, if anything? Muscle, of course!

【Great, here comes a speech.】

When the Z warriors trained in super-high gravity, they became strong enough to defeat the ultrapowerful enemies who came after them!

【Yeah, yeah. I get what you're saying and all, but it's making de-scaling kinda difficult, you know.】

Well, the whole point is to get used to it by keeping it active all the time.

【Great idea! Good luck, body brain!】

【Let's try one thousand times the gravity next!】>

【No, that'd kill me!】

So, yeah. I decided to try applying extra gravity to myself all the time.

If I'm constantly using it on myself, I bet it'll raise my physical stats, not to mention give me more Evil Eye proficiency points to boot.

It might even increase my Herculean Strength skill level or something.

Since this Evil Eye skill's only at level 1, it doesn't feel like anything but a little extra weight right now, but I'm sure it'll be quite a burden once it levels up.

Then, if I deactivate it during battle and return to normal gravity, I'll get to have a "remove the power limiter"-type moment!

Sweet.

I'm definitely gonna yell "RELEASE RESTRAINTS!" or something when I do it.

Well, I can't actually speak, but you know what I mean.

Huh?! My Space Perception is reacting to something!

A distortion in the air?

I've never experienced this before, but somehow, I know exactly what's happening.

Teleportation.

Something is about to teleport here.

I have no way of stopping it.

At my Spatial Magic level, I can't even teleport myself, never mind interfere with someone else's ability to do so.

Judging by the distortion in space I'm sensing, I'm guessing whoever's teleporting here must be really good at Spatial Magic.

That means they're way stronger than me, at least when it comes to Spatial Magic.

Most concerning of all is that they're using magic in the first place.

That means, without a doubt, that the user must be on a very high level of intelligence.

So far, I haven't seen a single monster use magic.

Even the fire dragon I defeated earlier is no exception.

It had magic skills, but it never once used them.

That's only natural.

Magic involves a very complicated process of composing spells.

The user needs a certain amount of intellect to be able to accomplish that.

In the fire dragon's case, it was far more effective to use its own skills to create fireballs than trying to construct magic spells.

There may be some monster species that can use magic, but they have simpler and more powerful skills to use instead.

However, whatever's about to teleport here is utilizing some seriously complicated magic.

Which means it must have a specific reason for coming here.

But what could that be?

All that's here is...me.

In other words, it must be coming here because of me.

I can't imagine that it's just teleporting here by coincidence.

All this reasoning flashes through my mind in seconds with Thought Acceleration.

I stand on guard.

The air cracks open, and a man appears.

A very dark man.

I don't know how else to explain it.

He's wearing black armor so tight, it's as if it's part of his body.

The small section of his face that's visible is dark, too.

So is his hair.

Only his eyes are eerily red.

I know the moment I lay eyes on this guy:

I can't win here.

He's on a different level.

And something else confirms this suspicion.

<Cannot be Appraised>

Those words.

Yet, for some reason, I don't feel like I'm in danger.

In fact, I feel a strange sense of kinship with this man.

And at the same time, I feel a little bit of irritation toward him.

Why is that?

I've definitely never met this dark man before.

I don't know why I would feel this way toward such a strange figure appearing out of nowhere.

What in the world are these feelings?

“*****?”

The man speaks.

But I don't recognize the language.

Without thinking, I tilt my head.

“++++++?”

The man says something else.

Could you please speak Japanese?

Otherwise I'm not gonna understand.

No hablo... whatever language this world uses.

The man frowns.

Hmm.

Well, he doesn't seem hostile at the moment.

But what do I do?

I don't understand him, and even if I did, I can't talk.

I could probably communicate in writing, but all I know is Japanese.

Either way, we wouldn't be able to understand each other.

This is a problem.

The man seems a bit flummoxed as well.

As we stand in awkward silence, something suddenly drops onto the ground between us.

It's a smartphone.

Huh?

Wait a sec.

It's weird enough that a smartphone exists here at all, but how did it appear in front of me like that?

This thing just popped up out of nowhere without my Detection picking up anything!

“Hello? This is Administrator D speaking.”

A voice suddenly comes out of the smartphone.

Two voices, in fact.

One speaks in Japanese, and one is a language I've never heard before.

No, wait, is it the language the guy was speaking earlier?

“*****?!”

Ah, the man sounds really surprised.

Which means the other language is the one he was speaking before: the language of this world.

“Yes. This is D. Ms. Spider, please wait a moment.”

Oh, okay.

I was asked to wait, so that's what I'll do.

The voice on the smartphone speaks with the man in this parallel world's language.

It's a woman's voice.

A very beautiful voice, but deeply unsettling for some reason.

It's that sort of thing.

She speaks in a flat, emotionless tone that's kind of frightening, too.

What's going on here?

Just hearing her voice is enough to make me tremble.

With each new statement, the man's expression changes.



The changes are pretty minor, but I can see his eyebrows furrowing or his eyes widening.

Eventually, the conversation seems to reach a stopping point. The man heaves a long sigh and turns around.

Then he teleports away with Spatial Magic, just like that.

Leaving me alone with the mysterious smartphone.

“Thank you for waiting. I’ve had a word with my friend there, so he shouldn’t be bothering you anymore.”

Oh, I see.

Wait, who are you anyway?

“I am D.”

Oh, okay.

?!

Wait, what?!

Did you just read my mind?!

“Yes. I did.”

That’s an invasion of my privacy!

“Well, since you can’t speak, I had to take temporary measures. I wouldn’t normally go so far as to read your mind.”

Normally? So does that mean you’ve been monitoring me this whole time?

“‘Monitoring’ isn’t the most pleasant way to put it. I think ‘spectating’ would be more fitting.”

Whatever.

Either way, you’re a stalker, right?

“I suppose. I simply never get tired of watching you.”

D... Now I remember.

I heard that name when I got the Wisdom skill.

“Yes. That was a reward for how hard you’ve worked. I’m pleased you seem to be making such effective use of it.”

So what’s your goal here?

“Amusement, that’s all.”

Huh?

“Simple amusement, nothing more. I have no deeper motives or purpose than that.”

Seriously?

“Yes. After all, I am this world’s most evil god.”

Everything about this sounds absurd, but for some reason, it doesn’t seem like you’re lying.

It’s like I really am hearing the thoughts of an evil god who thinks of me as a plaything or something but bears me no ill will.

Given how much my body is shaking of its own accord, I guess I might actually believe that the person speaking really is an evil god.

“Of course I am. As an evil god, nothing pleases me more than watching people struggle and suffer.”

Then was this whole world made for your entertainment?

“I’m afraid not. From this world’s point of view, I am an outsider.”

What’s that supposed to mean?

“I’m afraid I cannot tell you any more. If you knew everything, it would be quite boring.”

So you’re just going to keep toying with me.

“Indeed. So please continue to entertain me by struggling with everything you have. Perhaps then you’ll find the answers you’re looking for?”

Why, you...!

“Well, until next time.”

The smartphone disappears.

Without the slightest hint of a distortion in space.

That was my first encounter with Administrator D and the Administrator called Black.



A MAN'S FINAL STUBBORNNESS

How did this happen?

I watch the other me with only vague consciousness.

The other me is flinging magic at Shun without a moment's hesitation alongside the soldiers around me.

My magic won't work on Shun, though.

There's always been a difference between our capabilities.

It was a small difference at first, when we were little, but as we grew up, the difference grew as well.

There were times when I was jealous of his talent.

But when I saw how earnestly Shun worked to constantly improve himself, that jealousy turned into pure respect.

Ah, come to think of it, he was like that in our old lives, too. When he has a goal, he pushes toward it without hesitation.

In his past life, that enthusiasm was focused on games, but in this world, it was always his brother Julius, the hero.

The combination of his innate talent and his drive to reach an even higher goal is what led to the scene before my eyes.

The Flame Magic I'm using is a ranged attack that burns everything in a wide area.

It's not as powerful as bigger spells, but it can still do a lot of damage if you use it against a group of targets.

But Shun cancels it out with magic of his own, going as far as protecting the soldiers around him from harm.

He's both as stupidly strong and as stupidly softhearted as ever.

Only an idiot would go out of his way to protect his enemies.

I try to smile wryly, but contrary to my will, my face only contorts into a hateful expression.

"Katia! Come back to your senses!"

"How very rude. My senses are fine, thank you. You are a traitor, and traitors must be punished."

Words that I would never think come out of my mouth.

But deep down, I know.

It's the real me who's saying these words.

There have been plenty of signs, ever since I was a child.

In my old life, I was a man.

In this life, I'm a woman.

I have the soul of a man, but I'm living as a woman.

It doesn't quite match up.

Like water and oil, there's always been something that refused to mix properly.

And as I grew, that feeling only deepened.

As I entered puberty and my body began to transform further into a woman's, it became all the more obvious.

It wasn't just my body.

My inner self was gradually changing.

I didn't even notice.

But when Shun was attacked by Hugo, I realized something was different.

At that moment, I was so upset that even I didn't understand why.

When I realized Shun could've been killed, it was like my vision went blank.

At first, I thought it was just because Shun was a close friend from my old life, maybe the only close friend I had in this new one.

But from then on, whenever I saw him, I felt strangely uncomfortable.

I didn't know what that feeling was exactly.

All I knew was that I desperately didn't want to lose Shun.

And that feeling grew stronger every day.

When I'm near Shun, I feel restless and uneasy.

And yet, when he's not with me, I feel lonely and equally uneasy.

Either way, whether I'm with him or not, I feel strange.

I was bewildered by my own instability.

It was like I was being controlled by emotions I didn't understand.

But to be honest, I already knew what that feeling was.

I just didn't want to admit it.

Originally, I was a man.

Now I'm a woman.

I think that was around the time my heart finally broke in two.

Whenever I saw Sue or Yuri hanging off Shun, my heart began to splinter.

Still, part of me refused to admit it.

My heart and mind were at odds with each other.

But the scales had already been tipped in one direction.

The soul is dependent on the body.

My old self couldn't outmatch my new feelings.

So the part of me watching myself fight Shun now isn't what remains of Katia.

It's what remains of Kanata Ooshima.

I think it's because the traces of my old spirit still remained that I was able to resist Hugo's brainwashing a little.

After that first incident, Hugo was strictly monitored, though Shun doesn't know that.

My family took the lead in building a surveillance system to keep watch over him every single day.

And yet, somewhere along the line, we started to see suspicious signs in the reports.

We used only people we could trust for the surveillance.

People who would never betray us.

Nevertheless, information that was unquestionably false began cropping up in the reports.

I had the personnel changed.

In retrospect, that might have been a bad idea.

Shun inherited the Hero title and left the academy.

After that, other changes happened in the blink of an eye.

Yuri was the first to start acting strange.

She was always so obsessed with the Word of God religion, yet she suddenly stopped mentioning it at all.

Next was Sue.

She's never been the type to show her emotions, so I didn't notice the change.

Thinking back now, she started saying even less than usual at some point, but by then I was too distracted by the other changes to notice.

Something was starting to go terribly wrong.

I realized that, but I didn't know what was causing it.

I was called by the duke's people who were observing Hugo, became caught in their trap, then was ultimately brainwashed by Hugo.

It was only later that I finally understood.

By that time, most of the duke's people had already been brainwashed by him.

And now, I've ended up fighting Shun.

Hugo's brainwashing is terrifyingly powerful.

In a way, it's a miracle that even a tiny portion of my normal consciousness remains like this.

I'm sure everyone else who's been brainwashed now simply admires Hugo from the bottom of their hearts.

And even though I'm still faintly aware of what's happening, there's nothing I can do.

But still.

Even if there's nothing I can do, I can't just give up!

A man has to protect his pride, you know!

I try to rouse my hazy mind into action.

While my main consciousness is focused on composing a magic spell, I use all my strength to interrupt the construction.

Sabotaged by its own creator, the spell misfires.

I put all my power into it, forcing it to go explosively wrong.

“Katia?!”

Shocked, Shun runs over to me.

He catches me just before I fall to the ground.

But I can tell that the life is already draining out of me.

I attacked myself at point-blank range with the full strength of my own magic.

There’s no coming back from that, huh?

But I’m fine with that.

This is what I was trying to do anyway.

Through my blurring vision, I see Shun’s desperate expression.

Wow, what a face.

Makes me want to laugh.

Unlike before, this time my face does what I tell it to.

At least I’ll get to die laughing.

My consciousness starts to slip away into the depths, but it’s suddenly yanked back up by a warm light.

“Ah... Shun...?”

“Katia, are you back to normal?”

“Huh? My wounds...?”

The injuries from my spell’s misfire are gone.

“I healed them.”

Shun’s response is simple.

So much for that. I thought I was dead.

“You’re...so...ridicu...lous.”

“Stop trying to talk. We’re getting out of here.”

He lifts me up in his arms, carrying me bridal-style.

All at once, my heart starts pounding so fast that it feels like it might explode.

Despite the dire situation, my face flushes.

Ah, it’s no use.

I can’t fight it anymore.

What was left of my male spirit probably died just now.

As of this moment, Kanata Ooshima has truly become Karnatia Seri Anabald.





MIDDLE STRATUM CLEARED

I eat.

And eat.

And eat.

It's bitter.

So bitter.

Bitter, just a little sweet, and sad.

<Proficiency has reached the required level. Skill [Taboo LV 8] has become [Taboo LV 9].>

I've been proceeding through the Middle Stratum without any incident worth mentioning since my encounter with the self-proclaimed "evil god" D or whatever.

I still don't really know what that was all about.

The possibility that it was the real thing and not just "self-proclaimed" scares me.

At any rate, since D could read my mind, I know they must be far, far stronger than I am.

If D really did give me the Wisdom skill, they must be an administrator.

But either way, that doesn't really change anything.

I don't even understand what an administrator is.

If I had to guess, I'd say they probably manage the skills that exist in this world.

But that's only a guess, and even if it's true, I don't know what the significance is.

Before I acquired Wisdom, it did cross my mind that all these skills and stats were very gamelike, but I didn't really question it.

This is a parallel world, so I just assumed that's how things are here.

But if there are "administrators" who manage the skill system, there must be some purpose behind it.

I wouldn't think that if skills just existed as a natural phenomenon of this world, but when you throw in beings with intentions of their own, I have to assume there's some deeper reason.

Otherwise, why would someone make such a big, elaborate system?

Ugh, I dunno.

If D really is an administrator, I guess it's not impossible they'd make this whole thing just for the sake of entertainment...

That would explain all the gamelike mechanics, too.

But no, there must be a much deeper goal far beyond my understanding!

Otherwise, that would mean this whole world exists as a sideshow for D's amusement.

I don't like the sound of that.

Who would just roll over and accept it if they found out they're only a plaything?!

But I do know one thing about D.

The smartphone, the fluent command of Japanese...several signs pointing straight to Japan.

D must be somehow connected to Earth.

In which case, D might also know why I was reincarnated into this world.

If there really is a "next time," maybe I'll try asking about it.

Although I have no idea if D will give me a clear answer.

Aside from that, I don't have enough information to do anything but speculate.

So I have to conclude there's no point in racking my brains about "D," "administrators," and all that jazz any further.

Honestly, it's not like I can do anything about it anyway.

If beings that can control the skill system want to mess with me, I doubt I could put up much resistance.

Trying to go against an administrator would be like trying to stop a meteor from destroying the earth.

That's not the kinda thing I can win against.

Not just D, either. The dark guy who showed up in front of me earlier seemed way more powerful than me, too.

Since he used that mysterious language I'd never heard before, I'm guessing he's a native of this world.

Though since Appraisal didn't work, I couldn't confirm if he's human.

There's always someone stronger.

And there's no limit to how far up that goes.

I feel like I've been made even more aware of that now.

No matter how much I improve my skills and level up, that's all

just transient power given to me by the “administrators.” If they felt like it, they could take it away anytime.

Never mind a contest of strength. I wouldn’t even be able to qualify for the game.

Well, there’s no point in worrying about all that now.

I might as well forget about evil gods, administrators, and everything else unless they bother me again.

In the meantime, I’ll just keep concentrating on escaping the Middle Stratum.

And I’m not likely to suddenly lose all my skills and levels unless I get more involved with those guys (I hope), plus there’s no harm in raising them anyway, so I might as well keep doing that.

I can’t quite shake a little bit of anxiety, but this is all I can do, so I might as well do it to the best of my ability.

So I keep walking through the Middle Stratum, working on my skills as I go.

I inspect my skills as I proceed.

The new skills I got from defeating the fire dragon—Dimensional Maneuvering, Dragon Power, and Spatial Magic—are all super-useful.

As I guessed, Dimensional Maneuvering allows me to perform double jumps in midair.

When I activate it, near-invisible footholds appear in the air, and I can dash around by kicking off them.

Since it’s level 1 right now, the footholds are too fragile for me to run at full speed, but once it levels up some, I should be able to move just as freely through the air as I can on the ground.

It does use up my red stamina, but considering its effect, that’s not that surprising.

Dragon Power is an improved form of Wyrms Power. When I activate it, it consumes MP and SP to temporarily increase my stats.

In addition, when it’s active, I can use some of a dragon’s abilities. Specifically, the magic obstruction effect and breath attacks.

With Dragon Power activated, I can cover myself in the same magic-dispersing power seen in dragons’ scale skills.

Testing out the breath part, I discover it produces some kind of Dark attribute attack.

Neither of them is as powerful as the real thing, of course, but they’re nonetheless quite strong.

Since Spatial Magic is still low-level, I can’t do any useful spells yet.

Once it levels up, I’m sure it’ll be useful, so I’m going to try and level it up over time.

Unfortunately, both Dimensional Maneuvering and Dragon Power

consume SP.

Since monsters are still avoiding me like the plague, I'm having trouble getting any food.

That means I can't recover SP, so I have to avoid using it whenever possible.

Ultimately, that means even though I got these nice new skills, I can't level them up at all!

I'm loaded with MP, though, so I'm focusing on skills that use that for now.

Various magic types, Poison Synthesis, Magic Warfare, Evil Eye skills, and so on.

My Shadow Magic skill reached level 10.

The offshoot skill I got as a result was Dark Magic.

Even maxed out, Shadow Magic is still kinda sketchy, so I'm planning to work on Dark Magic instead.

I maxed out Poison Synthesis and Poison Magic, too.

For some reason, they both produced sort of unexpected skills: Medicine Synthesis and Healing Magic, respectively.

I guess maybe it's true what they say about one man's poison being another man's cure or whatever?

At any rate, this means I finally have the means to heal myself.

Up until now, my recovery's depended on leveling up and HP Auto-Recovery, so being able to heal wounds whenever I want is huge.

That being said, it's still pretty low-level. And since my HP is full, I can't test out its effects just yet.

If I get a chance sometime, maybe I'll reduce my own HP so I can test it.

I also maxed out Heretic Magic.

But you'll never guess what god-awful skill derived from that.

Taboo.

Luckily, it didn't level up, but I thought my heart was gonna stop for a second.

Actually, even though it definitely didn't level up at that moment, it's hit level 9 at some point without my noticing.

One more level and it'll be maxed out.

This could be really bad.

A few of my Evil Eyes maxed out, too.

Cursed Evil Eye evolved into Jinx Evil Eye.

This Evil Eye transfers the HP and stuff reduced by the curse over to me.

It also deals more damage than before, so definitely an improvement over the first form.

I can't absorb stats or anything, but being able to absorb SP is very cool.

Combined with eating, now I can get even more SP out of enemies!

Paralyzing Evil Eye evolved, too, into Inert Evil Eye.

Instead of simple paralysis, this apparently inflicts an attribute similar to being frozen in time.

With paralysis, monsters could still twitch and squirm a little, but now they'll be frozen solid.

I'm guessing this is a combination of paralysis and some attribute I'm not familiar with.

Although I can't say for sure, since I don't see any attribute like that in the skill list.

Well, either way, I've still won as soon as this takes effect, so that just means I've gotten that much stronger.

Heavy Evil Eye has leveled up, but I obtained it only a short while ago, so it isn't maxed out yet.

Instead, since I've been using it on myself this whole time, I got a resistance skill to counteract the extra weight.

Unfortunately, this skill is kind of reducing the effectiveness of my muscle training. Dammit.

Lastly, Telescopic Sight.

This ended up evolving into Clairvoyance.

It improves on the effects of Telescopic Sight and adds an X-ray effect.

Now I can see through walls to the scenery on the other side.

However, it's not quite as cool as the "seeing anywhere in the world" effect you think of when you hear "Clairvoyance."

In the end, it's just an extension of Telescopic Sight.

But thanks to Clairvoyance, I've started to notice something.

A long slope, climbing upward.

It's been a long journey.

I've gone through a lot of troubles along the way.

But now I can finally settle down.

And leave this god-awful hellhole behind.

Good to see you again, Upper Stratum.

I fell into the Lower Stratum, encountered a dreadful beast, and ran for my life.

I traveled all over the awful hellscape so hot it constantly drained my HP.

I came close to death many times.

But I made it back.

I survived! I made it!



ESCAPE

Katia passes out in my arms.

Her wounds are healed completely, but the HP and emotional energy she lost won't come back so easily.

I do a quick Appraisal and breathe a sigh of relief when I see that her life isn't in immediate danger.

At the same time, I confirm that Hugo's brainwashing has been undone.

When she started to faint, I saw magic come flying out of her.

In a panic, I create a wall of ice, blocking the flying spell.

"Shun! Don't lose focus!"

Hyrince's words remind me we're still surrounded.

He's holding a large shield on his left arm while carrying Anna with his right.

Normally, he'd block attacks with the shield in one hand and cut down the enemy with a sword in the other, but since he's holding the unconscious Anna, he's solely focused on defense.

Still, he's been doing an incredible job of using the size and weight of the enormous shield to bash the enemy back.

Seeing this, the other soldiers are too frightened to try to attack.

To be frank, no ordinary soldiers can stop us.

There's a huge difference in our stats, and if we really wanted to, we could easily knock down all the people surrounding us.

But I'd rather avoid that if possible.

No matter how strong we are—no, *because* we're so strong—if we fight without holding back, people will die.

I could try to restrain myself, but I've got Katia, and Hyrince is holding Anna.

And there are quite a few enemy soldiers, not just one.

I'm not so overconfident to think I can control my strength properly in this situation.

While Leston and Klevea are stronger than the average soldier, they're not as strong as Hyrince and me.

Only Ms. Oka can thoroughly dominate the soldiers in this battle, but she seems to have bigger problems on her hands.

“Fancy meeting you here.”

Sophia stands in Ms. Oka’s way, facing her down.

“Negi...”

“Didn’t I tell you not to call me by that name?”

Ms. Oka starts to say something, but Sophia cuts her off.

Even though I’m not directly involved in the standoff, I feel overwhelming pressure that sends a shiver down my spine.

Negi...?

What’s she talking about?

No, now’s not the time to worry about that.

“Oh, here. Present for you, Ms. Oka.”

Sophia tosses something toward her.

It leaves a trail of red liquid on the ground as it rolls to Ms. Oka’s feet.

As soon as I catch a glimpse of it, my throat threatens to close up.

“P...Potimas?!”

Potimas, the goodwill ambassador of the elves, who was with Ms. Oka the first time we met in this world.

“I-it can’t be!”

The object on the ground is, beyond any doubt, his freshly severed head.

Watching Ms. Oka fly into a panic, Sophia smiles pleasantly and licks the blood off her hands.

“How disgusting. Perhaps his rotten personality made his blood taste bad?”

“You did this...to Potimas?”

“What other explanation could there be?”

Sophia shows genuine curiosity toward Ms. Oka’s cry of disbelief.

“But you...!”

“You’re not going to say I could never kill anyone, are you? You’ve done plenty of killing yourself, after all. This isn’t Japan. The same rules don’t apply here, and you know it.”

Ms. Oka has killed people?

No. Knowing her, if that’s true, it’s only because the situation didn’t leave her any other option.

Right now, Sophia’s other lines are more important.

Her words seem to imply she’s almost certainly a reincarnation herself.

If that’s the case, it would explain why Ms. Oka knows her, and why she might be working with Hugo, another reincarnation.

And in that case, if she can still murder people without a second thought, then I have no more chance of reaching an understanding with her than with Hugo.

Ms. Oka must feel the same way. Though still in shock, she’s

clearly prepared to do battle with Sophia.

“Ms. Oka, you want to fight me? Oh, stop. Master told me not to lay a hand on you.”

Master?

Does she mean Hugo?

But then...something seems wrong about that.

“But I suppose you give me no choice. It’s not my fault if it’s just self-defense, right?”

Sophia takes a step forward.

As she does so, Ms. Oka launches a Wind Magic spell at her.

But while it should’ve been more than enough to blow a human body away, it loses power as it approaches Sophia. By the time it reaches her, it’s barely strong enough to ruffle her hair a little.

It’s happening again.

Just like in the castle, magic doesn’t work on her.

It evaporates as if she’s broken it up somehow.

She must have a skill that nullifies magic.

I don’t know what it is, but it’s probably best to assume that no magic can touch her.

If so, Ms. Oka is in danger.

Since Ms. Oka is an elf, magic is probably the core of her fighting technique.

Elves’ physical growth is slower than humans’, so they tend to have low physical stats.

She looks a lot younger than us, even though she was probably born around the same time we were in this world.

I know that appearances don’t always accurately reflect stats, but as far as I can tell from what I’ve seen so far, Ms. Oka specializes in magic more than physical attacks.

She might be able to handle physical combat to a certain extent, but she doesn’t even have a weapon.

This Sophia girl is way too scary to challenge unarmed.

I don’t see how she can win.

“Ms. Oka!”

The second I move to help my teacher, I’m stopped by a blade whizzing past my eyes.

It’s a round throwing weapon that practically grazes my nose on its way by.

A chakram?

Changing its trajectory in midair as if it has a will of its own, the chakram whips back toward me.

I knock it away with a sword, searching for its owner.

My Presence Detection skill alerts me to a figure standing on the roof.

All in black, the figure looks just like a ninja.

“Ngh!”

Turning around to seek the source of the short grunt, I see Hyrince being attacked by another black-clad assailant.

The ninja’s movements seem about on par with Hyrince’s, but since Hyrince is holding the unconscious Anna, he’s hard-pressed to keep up.

“Ahh!”

A cry of pain from my other side draws my attention to Ms. Oka, who’s being lifted into the air by the throat by Sophia.

Shit!

Hyrince is barely keeping up with the ninja, and Leston and Klevea have their hands completely full with the other soldiers.

Every time I try to move, the flying chakram cuts me off, so I can’t even take a step toward anyone.

Worst of all, if I make one wrong move now, Sophia might snap Ms. Oka’s neck.

Shit. This could be the end.

“Swooping in to the rescue in your time of need!”

A strangely out-of-place line echoes telepathically in my mind.

At the same time, a loud whoosh cuts through the air above.

Something dives toward us out of the sky, shining as if reflecting the light of the sun.

It bombs the soldiers and ninjas with balls of light, probably a Light Magic attack, then attacks Sophia.

Sophia dodges, releasing Ms. Oka in the process.

The flying creature turns and lands directly in front of me: a beautiful, glittering white wyrm.

“A true hero always shows up late!”

“Fei?”

Her telepathic voice and, more than anything, her familiar presence make me believe without a doubt that this is Fei in a newly evolved form.

But how did this happen?

Fei used to be a black, wingless earth wyrm.

But now, the creature before me is a white wyrm with wings.

Does it have something to do with her entering that mysterious shell after I became the hero?

Well, I guess that doesn’t matter right now.

“I just woke up, so I don’t really know what’s going on, but you are in trouble, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, you’re just in time.”

Even so, the situation remains grim.

The soldiers definitely took some damage from Fei’s attack, but Sophia, our biggest problem, is still unharmed.

Not only that, but the two black-clad ninjas seem strong.

They might be too much for me and Hyrince to handle while we're carrying Katia and Anna, respectively.

"Shun! Get on that wyrm and get out of here!"

My older brother Leston shouts.

But if I followed his orders, then I would be leaving him behind.

Fei has gotten pretty big now, so she should be able to carry several people, but I don't think she could fit all our allies.

"Don't worry about us! Shun, and Hyrince, too! Take Ms. Oka and run!"

Leston clearly intends to stay behind as our rear guard.

However, I can't imagine he and his soldiers could take Sophia and the ninjas on their own.

As I hesitate, Hyrince distracts a black-clad assailant long enough to grab the unconscious Ms. Oka and run up to me.

"Shun! Let's go!"

Holding Anna in one arm and Ms. Oka in the other, Hyrince urges me on.

"Do you think we'll let you escape?"

"No, but we're going to anyway!"

Sophia and the two ninjas come after us, so Fei lets loose a breath attack at them.

At the same time, she grabs Hyrince and me in her claws, taking off with us by force.

"Fei?!"

"I'm sorry, but we have no other choice against that thing! We have to get away!"

In a matter of moments, we ascend into the sky.

Below us, I can see Sophia, standing unharmed despite Fei's breath attack.

"There's no way we could've beaten her, even if we stayed."

I'd like to object to Fei's bitter words, but I can't deny them.

And so, we run away.

Leaving Klevea and my brother Leston behind.



THE RULER AND THE NINJA

“Oh dear. They got away.”

“That’s rich, considering we let them get away on purpose.”

“I suppose. In fact, if that dragon hadn’t come along, I was starting to wonder how we would let them escape.”

“Yes, since Master told us not to lay a hand on the hero. Yet, why did you disobey that order by fighting him?”

“I just wanted to see how strong he was.”

“Is that really all?”

“Of course.”

“...I shall have to report this incident to Master.”

“You helped me, didn’t you? Will you take part of the responsibility, then? Or keep quiet and become an accomplice?”

“...I shall report it.”

“Come on. We’ll get in trouble.”

“Perhaps you should’ve thought of that before you made that decision, then.”

“You’re such a stickler.”

“Be that as it may. Even if I don’t report it, Master is sure to find out what happened soon enough. If we report truthfully, perhaps our punishment will be lighter.”

“Knowing our master, there’s no telling if that’ll be the case, though...”

“At any rate, the master’s plan has begun. We must not disrupt it by acting on our foolish impulses.”

“All right, all right. I’m sorry, okay?”

“If you are truly sorry, please restrain yourself in the future.”

“Hmph. Hey, where’d the other one go anyway?”

“Burned by the dragon’s breath attack, and now baking in the sunlight.”

“How embarrassing.”

“Not everyone can be as strong as you.”

“Oh really? Does that include you?”

“Save your jests. If you decided to get serious, I could not even dream of posing a threat to you.”

“Well, aren’t you rebellious, then?”

“I am not. You are simply being dishonest with Master. And I am simply faithful to Master’s decrees.”

“Boy, now you’ve said it.”

“If that angers you, perhaps you can refrain from actions that go against the master’s wishes.”

“All right, I get it already.”



Special Chapter

THE GREAT ELROE LABYRINTH DISASTER INVESTIGATION CORPS

I look around at the gathering troops.

These are knights of the Renxandt Empire.

I've been recruited to guide them through the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

Unlike us labyrinth guides, the knights have never entered the labyrinth before.

As a result, my son is explaining the basics of the labyrinth to them.

"The place you knights have been sent to survey is in an area about ten days' journey from the entrance. That's ten days to get there. Ten days to investigate. And ten days to go home. If we don't have at least thirty days' worth of rations, we'll have to go back partway through. Ideally, it'd be best to bring at least ten days' worth of extra supplies."

The reason the knights are being dispatched is that the number of monsters in a certain area of the labyrinth has recently increased.

Their goal is to investigate the cause and thin out the monster population, but I question whether knights who have never once entered the labyrinth will truly be able to do this job properly.

The area where the monsters have been appearing in great numbers is the shortest route between the continents of Ksanagara and Daztrudia.

The Great Elroe Labyrinth, which connects these two continents, is the largest and most dangerous dungeon in the world.

However, as the ocean is occupied by fearsome water dragons and thus too hazardous to sail across, this valuable passage is the only reliable way to travel between the continents.

Therefore, despite being aware of the danger, there are many people who use the Great Elroe Labyrinth to travel.

Which is exactly why our occupation of labyrinth guide exists.

This is also the only means of cross-continental trade, so our kingdom of Ohts profits greatly from having an entrance to the

labyrinth.

So if the number of monsters keeps increasing and it becomes more difficult for people to traverse the labyrinth, it's a problem for both the Ohts Kingdom and the labyrinth guides.

If the kingdom loses some of its commerce and labyrinth tolls, there'll be less jobs for us.

So the troubled Ohts Kingdom asked its ally, the Renxandt Empire, for help.

Though it's technically an alliance, the reality is more like Ohts is a vassal nation of Renxandt.

Ohts is a small kingdom whose only source of income is the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

Its military power is low, its territory small.

Without the entrance to the labyrinth, it probably wouldn't even be able to keep up the pretense of being its own kingdom.

This current problem is too much for such a kingdom to solve alone.

Though it could also be said that this reflects just how impressive the wealth Ohts gains from the labyrinth is.

The profits from intercontinental trade. Traffic to the labyrinth. And the materials obtained from the monsters in the labyrinth.

This all enriches the Ohts Kingdom.

In exchange for a portion of that wealth, we've gained the backing of the powerful Renxandt Empire.

The Renxandt Empire doesn't want its share of the profits to disappear, either, which is why they've sent their knights to deal with the problem.

So it would be best for everyone involved if the cause of the monster outbreak could be found and destroyed during this outing.

One can only hope.

"There are many poisonous monsters in the labyrinth, so carrying an antidote is essential. Not to mention a light source, and fuel for it. One that uses fire is best. That way, if you get caught in a spiderweb, you can burn it immediately. And so, knights, we have provided a list here, if you would be so kind as to procure the supplies. Your guide will be equipped with a Spatial Storage item, so you can leave the transportation of the supplies to us. Oh, and why not write a letter to your family? This will probably be a long journey."

After my son's rapid explanation, the most the knights can do is nod dumbly.

If this is what we can expect from the knights sent to resolve the incident, then I fear for the future.

I'll just have to support them as best I can, so the letters they send to their families won't become their last will and testament.

It's been eight days since we entered the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

We're drawing close to the area where the outbreak is occurring.

I wasn't expecting very much from the knights, but they've turned out to be rather skilled as far as battle is concerned.

At first, I was afraid we'd just been given a bunch of spoiled young men from noble families, and they did indeed largely turn out to be the second and third sons of aristocrats.

However, the Renxandt Empire's strength is not to be underestimated.

This unit is not playing around.

"Our unit may be a mishmash of noble blood, true enough, but we have as much training and battle experience as any other corps. And this is a group of people who are unable to inherit titles of their own, after all. Everyone here is desperate to improve their standings through success in the field."

Or so I am told.

Some of the knights scoffed at my role as labyrinth guide at first, but once they experienced the difficulty of navigating here for themselves, their complaints soon subsided.

After a few days and nights in the constant darkness of the labyrinth, it becomes impossible to distinguish the passage of time, which is taxing on the mind and body alike.

We must pause for rest from time to time, of course, but this is a dangerous labyrinth where monsters are constantly roaming around.

Since it's impossible to relax completely in these circumstances, one can hardly get enough rest to fully recover, and soon no one has the energy for grouching.

It was also a great help that the captain of the knights quickly picked up on the difficulty of the labyrinth and instructed his men to follow my directions at all times.

The captain seems to be quite a capable man.

Thanks to him, the group has proceeded without losing anyone thus far, despite it being their first trip through the labyrinth.

Usually, a few people drop off, and we have to retrace our steps to find them.

But while I'm glad the knights turned out to be more competent than I expected, I still can't shake the feeling that something is going to go wrong.

We haven't reached the area the reports were about yet, but there are already more monsters than usual.

No casualties, either, but there have been several injuries.

There's a healing alchemist in the party, so it's not a major issue, but not knowing what might happen is the most frightening aspect of being in the labyrinth.

We brought a great deal of antidotes, and some of the knights have acquired Poison Resistance in battle along the way, so nothing too terrible should happen.

But the ominous feeling still persists.

Could the queen be lurking somewhere near?

It's not impossible.

The fact that taratect hunting has been all the rage on the Daztrudia side lately must mean the queen has laid eggs.

In other words, it came to the Upper Stratum.

The queen taratect is a walking natural disaster, one that transcends S rank.

The only record of one ever being defeated was very long ago, and it came at the price of the life of a hero as well as an entire army.

Even with that one gone, there are still five remaining in the world.

And one of them lives in the great labyrinth.

It usually stays in the lower areas, but when it lays eggs, it ascends to this layer, the Upper Stratum.

Hopefully, it went right back down afterward, but it's occasionally been known to stay around for a while, so we can't let our guard down.

Still, since the taratect outbreak is near the Daztrudia entrance this time, it's doubtful the queen would come all the way here to the Kasanagara side.

If, however, by some tiny chance we should run into that creature, all our lives may very well be forfeit.

We should avoid any large passages the queen would be able to traverse.

I suppose my other big concern is that there's an entrance to the Middle Stratum near the site of the problem.

Could it be that some powerful monster has emerged from the Middle Stratum and chased the monsters that lived there from their home?

But does such a powerful creature even exist in the Middle Stratum?

The adventurer who explored the Middle Stratum in the past reported that the monsters there were not particularly strong.

Though it wouldn't be surprising for a powerful monster to emerge from the Lower Stratum beneath it.

The queen is said to make her home in the Lower Stratum, but there are rumors that an even lower layer than that exists, the Bottom Stratum.

It's not known for sure whether this is true, though. It would be foolish enough to deliberately enter the Lower Stratum, never mind an

even lower area.

I suppose the other possibility is that some monster from those depths somehow crawled its way up through the Middle Stratum.

What a ridiculous idea.

Our thirteenth day in the labyrinth.

We arrive at our destination, prepared to exterminate monsters and investigate the cause of the outbreak.

But there's just one problem.

"There aren't any monsters."

"Hmm. The report said there was an abnormal number of monsters around here, but I don't see any signs of that."

"Yeah. If anything, there were tons more on the way here."

The number of monsters we encountered along the way certainly was large.

Normally, we'd try to avoid battle as much as possible, but this time, part of our mission is to thin out the monster population.

So every time we spotted one, the knights went into action.

As a result, the journey that was supposed to take ten days ended up taking twelve.

If we want to have enough supplies for the journey back, we have to finish our investigation as quickly as possible.

"Well, this is still only the first day of the investigation. No need to panic. Besides, if the monsters aren't here anymore, that's a good thing for us. It means the incident has already been resolved."

"I certainly hope so."

I respond lightly to the captain, but personally, I doubt things will wrap up that easily.

The bad feeling I've had since we entered the labyrinth has only gotten stronger.

When I get such a premonition, it usually doesn't lead to anything good.

Better to stay on our guard.

The fifteenth day.

"There really are no monsters here. Perhaps we should explore the large passage we've been avoiding?"

"Hmm. The large passage..."

Our investigation hasn't yielded any results.

It's only natural, since the monsters we were told to investigate aren't here.

But I'm reluctant to agree to the captain's proposal.

It's unlikely the queen would be about, but still, there are other strong monsters lurking in the larger passages.

In particular, the earth dragon, a dangerous monster with exceptional physical strength.

I would rather avoid entering the large passages if possible, but given our current goal, we might not have much of a choice.

“Very well. But, Captain, if it turns out to be too dangerous, we must retreat immediately.”

“Of course. Listen up, everyone! We’re heading into the large passage now! We’ll be retreating at the first sign of danger, so keep your wits about you!”

The troops advance at the captain’s command.

“Here it is.”

“Understood. We’ll proceed with caution from here.”

We enter the large passage. I look around carefully. There don’t seem to be monsters...at all.

“No monsters here, either?”

“Hmm. From what I’ve heard, isn’t the large passage supposed to have a lot of monsters?”

“Indeed. I’ve never seen one this quiet. It’s rather eerie.”

“Then we should proceed even more cautiously.”

My terrible premonition gets even stronger.

Every instinct is telling me that heading this way is dangerous.

“This can’t be good. My bad feeling about it isn’t going away.”

“Me too.”

The captain is sweating.

Similarly, cold sweat appears on my forehead.

We move ahead carefully.

Then my eyes fall on something.

“Is this...a spiderweb?”

“It must be a taratect-type monster.”

An enormous spiderweb.

Its creator is nowhere to be seen.

Judging by the size of the web, the creature that created it has undoubtedly grown to adulthood.

“Do you think...whatever made this web...is the source of the disturbance?”

“I’m sure of it. Look at this.”

I point farther down along the web. There, the half-eaten corpse of an earth wyrm is caught in the thread.

It’s even defeated an earth wyrm. At this rate, it might have evolved into the greater classes.

Taratects increase drastically in strength as they evolve.

At the top, the queen is a legendary-class beast.

Newborn spiders, on the other hand, are F rank, the lowest possible.

It goes without saying that the changes brought on by each evolution are huge.

The greater taratect is a very rare evolutionary form.

Its strength is rank B, nearly even rank A.

If one of them has defeated an earth wyrm, it's possible that it's already reached A rank.

"Can you take on an A-rank monster?"

"Not likely. Perhaps if we were fully prepared to be completely wiped out in the process, we could take it down, but short of that, it would be virtually impossible."

"Thought so. Then we should go back. We're out of our element here."

"I agree. Better to escape as soon as possible."

The captain and I are in total agreement.

Just as we exchange nods and turn to leave, a powerful chill assaults my senses.

My breath catches in my throat.

The spiderweb behind us...

Something has appeared there.

I exchange glances with the captain.

Nodding again, we slowly turn back.

Then my eyes meet with something else.

A spider.

It looks similar to a normal taratect but not quite the same.

A small black spider monster, with its front legs shaped like scythes.

Immediately, I know.

This thing is bad news.

I don't know how it appeared so suddenly, but it's extremely dangerous.

My body stiffens with fear.

Greater taratect?

No.

This thing is far beyond that level.

"Retreat!"

The captain's exclamation brings me back to my senses.

We run away at full speed.

Formation be damned.

We simply pump our legs as quickly as we can, desperate to escape from that thing.

I don't know how far we ran before we finally escaped the large passage.

I looked back several times, but it wasn't chasing us.

Sighs of relief run through the group.

Once the captain, too, has taken a deep breath, he immediately does a roll call.

Not a member is missing.

“Let’s leave the labyrinth right away.”

“Yes. We must contact our kingdom. The likes of us can’t do anything about a beast like that.”

It’s not as if we fought it at all.

But it was easy to tell at a single glance.

That thing was a horrifically strong monster.

The reason why there were so many monsters on the way here must be that they were chased out of their homes by that thing.

And the reason why there were no more monsters in this area was that they had all fled.

That monster is easily above an A rank.

At worst, it might even be an S rank.

Only a hero or a group of elite warriors from every kingdom could take on a monster like that.

Ordinary people like us would never stand a chance.

“Zoa Ele.”

Someone mutters.

“What’s that?”

“That monster. It’s a spider monster that’s supposed to be an ill omen. But I didn’t think they were normally that terrifying.”

Apparently, that monster is a species called a Zoa Ele.

But I’d never heard of such a creature appearing in the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

Perhaps it’s a mutation of the taratect species?

The knight says it was different from any normal Zoa Ele, so it must be a mutation of some kind.

At any rate, there’s nothing else we can do here.

We escape from the labyrinth shortly thereafter.



HIDING

Ten days have passed since we escaped from the kingdom.

An old friend of Hyrince's is letting us stay in his home in a town some ways away from the border.

We're also able to get information through this person's network, which has been a big help.

However, that's exactly why I can't stay here for long.

As of now, my position has deteriorated to something terrible.

The prince who murdered his father and plotted a coup d'état in his kingdom to forcibly take the throne.

That's my current reputation.

Although the coup d'état failed, the king still fell in the assassination attempt, so the kingdom's been thrown into chaos.

Leston, the third prince, has been condemned as my accomplice, and people like Katia's family and the elves have been accused of helping me put together a rebel army.

That's the scenario they've devised.

It seems Leston ended up being captured after that battle.

I'm relieved he wasn't killed on the spot, but it may be only a matter of time until he's executed for treason.

I should have forced him to escape with us...

...but I know that wasn't possible, or we'd be in a different situation now.

At the time, I had no way of opposing Sophia.

Magic doesn't work on her, and I was carrying Katia at the time, so there's no way I could've fought her.

I understand that, but I still can't help regretting it.

Our escape isn't the only part I feel guilty about, either.

Thinking back, when I used Telepathy to communicate with Sue and Katia before, something did seem off.

Sue was definitely acting strange, and Katia stopped using Japanese, even when it was just the two of us talking.

Katia always speaks Japanese when we talk alone.

Something was happening.

But I didn't notice.

If I had, I could've stopped Hugo from doing all this.

Trying to banish those thoughts, I swing my arms, practicing my form without a sword in hand.

When I'm exercising, that's the only time I don't have to think about anything.

As I immerse myself in practicing to avoid thinking useless thoughts, I hear a knock at the door.

"What on earth are you doing?"

"Katia, are you sure you should be walking around on your own?"

Katia, who was bedridden until very recently, opens the door and enters.

"Yeah. My body's fine. My head still hurts from time to time, though."

"Don't push yourself, all right? I know the brainwashing's gone now, but it could still be affecting you."

Hugo's influence runs deep.

Katia managed to come to her senses for just a moment through sheer force of will, but when she did, she tried to kill herself.

The indoctrination was so strong that she had no other choice.

Although the effects of the brainwashing should be gone now, Katia still gets headaches for some unknown reason.

"I told you, Shun, I'm fine. Oh, right, I actually wanted to ask you to Appraise something."

"Appraise?"

"Yeah. I got some new skill, but I've never heard of it. I don't remember ever seeing it in the skill encyclopedia, so I have no idea what it does. I thought maybe you could look into it with Appraisal."

"Oh really? All right."

I activate Appraisal on Katia.

She definitely does have more skills than before.

Including some I don't have.

<Divinity Expansion: Expands divinity field>

Even after Appraising it, I don't understand.

Maybe I can Appraise it further.

<Divinity Field: The deep field of a living thing's soul. It is the basis of all life, as well as the self's final field of dependence.>

I still don't understand.

"I'm sorry. I don't really get it."

"Even after Appraising it?"

"Yeah. It seems to have something to do with your soul, but I'm not sure what it does exactly."

Both of us frown in thought for a moment.

"Oh well, I guess that's fine. I also got something called Heresy Resistance."

"Right. That's probably because you broke through Hugo's

brainwashing.”

“And then there’s, uh, Parallel Minds?”

“When you turn it on, it’s like you temporarily have a split personality.”

“Wait, really? What’s the point of that?”

“Well, one side can fight like normal, and the other can use magic.”

“What? Isn’t that basically cheating?”

“I guess so, if you think of it as temporarily doubling your battle abilities.”

“Ooh. I’m gonna turn it on, then.”

“Ah, I wouldn’t keep it on all the time if I were you. I tried the same thing when I first got it, but if you leave it on nonstop, you start to lose track of which personality is the real you. I mean, having multiple personalities is called a disorder for a reason. It’s better to keep it off except when you’re in battle.”

“Oof. That’s kinda scary.”

“By the way...”

“Yeah?”

“Aren’t you a little close?”

Katia is standing in front of me.

Like, right in front.

Since I’m taller, I have to look down at her, which means I end up, you know, looking at her chest.

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I kinda can’t help it. I know you were a guy before, but you’re a girl now.”

“Oh? So you do see me that way, do you? Iiinteresting.”

“Ah, no, I mean, uh...you know, it’s, like, a guy’s nature or whatever... You get it, right?”

“Hmm. How would you respond if I do something like this, then?”

Katia takes a step closer, her chest pressing against mine.

“Okay, okay, you win! I surrender! Don’t tease me like that!”

“Ah, so innocent.”

Katia grins as she steps back.

“Well? Feel a little better now?”

“Oh...y-yeah. I... Thanks.”

So that’s what she was up to?

She must have been messing with me on purpose to get me to relax a little.

Really, she’s always so thoughtful.

“Hey, can I ask you something? That Healing Magic you used on me before wasn’t normal Healing Magic, was it?”

Katia looks at me inquiringly.

How should I answer...?

“Would you rather not tell me?”

“No, no. It’s not that...”

“Oh, it’s all right. I don’t wanna force you. I was just wondering if you could use it to heal Ms. Oka.”

It’s not that I didn’t want to tell her, exactly, but she didn’t seem to want to press the question.

“I tried a while ago, but it didn’t work.”

“Gotcha.”

Our teacher is currently suffering from a status condition called Coma.

It’s a condition that prevents her from waking up.

Her life doesn’t seem to be in danger, but she’s sleeping like the dead.

By Appraising her, I learned that the condition should wear off on its own in fifteen days.

Today’s the tenth day, so even if we don’t do anything, Ms. Oka should wake up in five days.

I have no doubt Sophia is the one who put her in that condition.

Why would she do something so inconvenient, and why would she set it up to wear off on its own?

I don’t get it.

But I’m guessing that part of it is because Ms. Oka knows about Sophia.

At any rate, we can’t access any of Ms. Oka’s information for five more days.

The Seven Deadly Sins skill that Hugo possesses. Sophia.

The slain Potimas. My brother Leston. There’s so much I want to ask about.

Judging by their interactions that day, Ms. Oka and Leston seemed to know each other.

But I have no idea how.

I also didn’t know until that day that Leston had his own soldiers.

But Ms. Oka knew all about it, as if they were old comrades.

It’s obvious my brother Leston had some connection to Ms. Oka and, thus, to the elves.

But what was he trying to do, and why did he have soldiers?

I want to ask, but Ms. Oka won’t wake up, and Leston’s been captured.

All I know is that my brother was seriously concerned for my safety, and he helped me escape.

I know he never held any ill will toward me.

Is it possible he knew somehow that all of this was going to happen?

“How’s Anna?”

“She’s recovering, but she still can’t speak yet.”

Anna, who was also brainwashed by Hugo, hasn’t recovered from that yet.

I’m working on undoing it with status condition—canceling magic, but she still has to be confined to a room for now.

Unlike Ms. Oka’s Coma, this will be permanent if we don’t figure something out.

Whenever I have time, I use the canceling magic until my MP runs out.

It’s a slow process, but I have been seeing signs that it’s starting to work.

If it keeps going well, I should be able to remove the brainwashing completely.

Although I can’t deny that prioritizing Anna is delaying Ms. Oka’s treatment.

Since we know she’ll wake up before too long, I can’t really help it.

I’m sorry, Ms. Oka.

But I have things I want to ask Anna, too.

Anna was with my brother Leston.

Which means she knew what he was doing.

On top of that, since she was brainwashed, she probably knows about Hugo’s actions to some extent.

Katia’s already proved that memories from when someone was brainwashed stay intact after they’re released from it.

As soon as she woke up, she told me everything.

How her family had been keeping an eye on Hugo.

How the guards who were watching him were brainwashed.

And how the brainwashing spell eventually reached Katia herself.

After being converted, she said she accepted Hugo’s every word as absolute truth, without ever questioning it.

Turns out that instead of feeling like you’re being forced to do something against your will, it feels like voluntarily vowing absolute loyalty to Hugo.

Just hearing about it is terrifying.

The victim has no idea they’re being manipulated.

They think they’re acting of their own free will, so they make no effort to resist it.

Katia told me she thinks the only reason she could fight it at all was because the spirit of her former male self was still present inside her.

For some reason, when she explained this, she seemed to put a lot of emphasis on being a former man who’s now a woman.

“Man, though, I was pretty surprised at Fei’s transformation.”

“Yeah.”

Fei had evolved, becoming a light wyrm.

Apparently, this new evolution was suddenly available to her because I became the hero.

Since we have a contract as master and familiar, my obtaining the Hero title had an indirect effect on Fei.

According to Hyrince, there have been similar cases in the past.

When a hero has a monster familiar, that monster undergoes a special evolution.

This is how Fei apparently shifted gears from being an earth wyrm to a light wyrm.

With her powers as an earth wyrm still intact.

Earth wyrms are known for their exceptional defense power.

So Fei gets to keep that defense, while gaining the ability to maneuver freely on both land and sky thanks to her new wings.

Her newly acquired skills are Light Wyrm level 9, Light Magic level 1, and Flight level 1.

In terms of pure stats, she’s become stronger than the earth wyrm we fought at the academy, who was probably Fei’s parent.

Frankly, she’s even stronger than me.

Even though I’ve gotten much stronger since I became the hero and started intensely training.

Even if it’s just for the sake of convenience, it doesn’t seem right to me for a master to be weaker than his familiar.

Right now, Fei is hiding in a forest close to the town we’re in.

She’s far too large for us to bring her into the town.

If we did, she might draw unwanted attention and tip off our pursuers.

Right now, we’re spectacularly high on the “most wanted” list.

Which is why we can’t stay here for long.

We have to make sure our pursuers don’t find us.

This has gotten way past the point when defeating Hugo would solve everything.

Even people who aren’t brainwashed now think I’m a criminal who murdered the king.

As long as that misunderstanding is still in place, I can’t walk the streets safely.

Hugo, on the other hand, has become officially recognized by the Church as the new hero, Julius’s successor.

As the new hope of the human race and the next in line to rule a powerful empire, he’s admired all over the world.

If I speak up now, it’s obvious that anything coming out of my mouth will simply be dismissed as the lies of a criminal.

We need to do something.

But I have no idea how to go about it.

Far too late, I find myself regretting that I never took an interest in politics.

If I had any connections, maybe I could use those as a starting point to clear my name.

When I complain about this to Katia without thinking, she gives a surprising response.

“Well, you had no choice there. You might not have noticed, but you were being tactfully kept out of politics anyway.”

Huh?

“Shun, you know why the true queen didn’t like you, right?”

“Yeah.”

The true queen, the king’s wife, is Cylis and Sue’s real mother.

My and Julius’s mother was the king’s third concubine, and Leston’s mother his second.

“Your mother was from a weak noble family without any connections, but when Julius became the hero, many factions tried to use that to their advantage. Julius objected to that, so he spent most of his time traveling around as the hero and rarely came home. Well, the king’s wife and Cylis didn’t like that. There were movements to use you to get to Julius, or to curry favor with you yourself, so the queen and her people did everything in their power to keep you away from that.”

Seriously?

This is all directly related to me, but I had no idea it was going on.

“You never thought it was weird that you never had to take classes on politics or anything, despite being royalty?”

“No, not really. I mean, Sue didn’t, either, so I figured it wasn’t a big deal...”

“Well, Sue’s a special case, too. The queen wanted her to be close to you, since it would make you easier to control, so she made a point of keeping you together. I bet she instructed Sue to keep a close eye on you.”

“What?!”

For real?!

Then Sue’s whole “I love you, Big Brother” shtick was just an act to hide her real motives?

I don’t know how to deal with that.

“Oh...but she really has always felt strongly about you, so don’t worry about that.”

“No, but...”

“If that wasn’t real, I’ll eat my hat. Seriously, a younger sister

who's secretly a *yandere* or whatever? She's one powerful rival."

O-okay then.

Katia reassures me with such intense confidence that I guess I better believe her.

Though I get the feeling I shouldn't ask what she means by "rival."

"At any rate, you wouldn't have been able to do anything about this situation even if you were involved in politics. Don't feel bad."

"How can I not feel bad?"

"Well, we know for a fact that the power of a duke's entire household turned out to be useless here, so there's that at least."

"Ah..."

That's right.

On top of Katia being brainwashed and used by Hugo, her parents are being framed as part of the rebellion.

My brother Leston isn't the only one who's been captured.

Katia's parents are also being charged with crimes they didn't commit.

This is all because of Hugo and Cylis's schemes.

Even if I'd tried to make allies or gain political favor, everything would've been turned over in an instant thanks to Hugo's brainwashing.

"I'm sorry your family got mixed up in all this, too."

"Nah, that's not your fault. It's because of that bastard Hugo. You know, you always try to take on everything by yourself. This might not mean much coming from someone who got brainwashed, but you should really try to rely on other people more."

That's true.

Katia is right, as usual.

"Thanks. I feel a little better now."

"Yeah, that's right. You better be grateful!"

When I give my genuine thanks, Katia replies with a smug grin.

She's probably pretty stressed herself with her family being captured and all, yet here she is trying to cheer me up.

She's such a good friend, I almost feel like she's wasted on someone like me.

"I really can't do anything without you, Katia. This just proves how much I need you all over again. Don't ever leave my side, okay?"

"Wha—?!"

Apparently embarrassed by my words, Katia sputters and turns bright red.

"Shun, are you in there? Oh, sorry. Were you confessing your love or something?"

The door opens, and Hyrince peers inside.

Apparently, Katia's red face gave him a weird misunderstanding.

"No, nothing like that."

When I correct him lightly, Katia's face falls a little.

"Yeah. Right, of course. That's just how you are. Gotcha."

"Katia?"

"I find that side of you terribly annoying, you know."

"What? Why?!"

I don't understand.

"Uhhh... Are you two just about done?"

Hyrince calls from the other side of the mosquito net.

"Oh, right, yes."

At my reply, Hyrince reenters with a tense expression.

"Leston, the duke, and the duchess are set to be executed in three days."

Katia and I both catch our breath.

Leston and both of Katia's parents...are going to be executed.

"The announcement has been made pretty grandly. Most likely, the execution is a trap meant to lure us into their clutches."

Our pursuers haven't been able to find us yet.

Does that mean they've changed strategies from chasing us down to luring us to them?

"So keeping that in mind...what do you want to do?"

Do we plunge in knowing it's probably a trap, or do we abandon Leston and the others?

The answer is obvious.

"Let's go."



ENCOUNTER WITH HUMANS

I eat.

And eat.

And eat.

Like drawing in a thread.

Slowly and carefully.

My chewing is more like slurping.

<Proficiency has reached the required level. Skill [Satiation LV 2] has become [Satiation LV 3].>

<Proficiency has reached the required level. Skill [Divinity Expansion LV 4] has become [Divinity Expansion LV 5].>

Upon reaching the Upper Stratum, I immediately started constructing a new home.

There's a nice, wide space pretty close to the entrance to the Middle Stratum, so I decided to make that my territory for now.

In the Middle Stratum, my thread burned up so fast that I couldn't even make a simple home, so this is my first since the one that got blown away by the earth dragon Araba in the Lower Stratum.

Ahhh, nothing beats this sense of security!

It was super-hot in the Middle Stratum, and I didn't have the protection of my thread, so I was far from getting a restful sleep.

Now, compare that with the incredible comfort that is the Upper Stratum!

The temperature is nice and cozy, not too hot or too cold!

I can put up as much thread as I like, so my home's totally break-in-proof!

And there are no strong monsters up here, so I can finally sleep soundly!

Ah, this is the best.

So, I spent a couple days rolling around doing nothing.

Listen, I've worked really hard this whole time and barely made it

out alive, so I'm allowed to take a little vacation.

However, I can't go on like this forever.

Unlike before, since I have the delightful combo of Intimidation and Fearbringer now, monsters don't come anywhere near me.

And since no monsters are trying to charge my house, I'm not getting any food.

In order to secure food and gain experience, I have to go hunting.

Not to mention, I want to expand my map of the Upper Stratum and find an exit.

I haven't made any preparations for going outside just yet, but there'd certainly be no harm in at least finding an exit.

But considering how large the Upper Stratum is, I doubt I'll find one that easily, so I'll just consider it a stroke of good luck if I happen to stumble on one.

The main purpose of hunting is securing food, followed closely by gaining experience.

Once I gain one more level, I'll be level 20, meaning I'll be able to evolve.

So I do some laid-back hunting in the Upper Stratum for a few days.

But there are no monsters to be found up here.

Apparently, this strange phenomenon is the work of some mysterious monster.

According to one of the few surviving frogs in the Upper Stratum:

"Yeah, it's some dangerous creature with a super-scary aura who uses tons of poison and magic. Why wouldn't we run away from that?"

Makes sense.

The Great Elroe Labyrinth Upper Stratum Monsters' Union is taking the situation very seriously and plans to set up an operation center nearby to deal with the problem soon.

Just kidding. Tee-hee.

The "dangerous creature" is me, of course. Tee-hee-hee.

THERE ARE NO MONSTERS AT ALL! THEY ALL RAN AWAY!

The second I started setting up shop in this area, those cowards all up and ran for the hills!

At first, I figured it'd be easy to catch monsters here, since it's not like they can escape into magma like in the Middle Stratum or anything. But even I have my limits, you know!

I have to travel several days away from my home to even find any monsters! What the hell is this?!

Thanks to that, I've been on a trip for a few days now, making simple homes instead of returning to my base!

What am I, a nomad?!

Well, I guess what I'm doing makes me more of a hunter-gatherer than a nomad, but still.

Ugh... Unreal. Seriously, there's nooooo way.

Making the trip back to my home every single time is a pain, so I've been raising my Spatial Magic level at top speed.

Spatial Magic level 9: Long-Distance Teleport.

A wonderful spell that lets you instantly relocate to any place you've been to before.

Since I learned this spell, the problem of not being able to return to my home easily has been solved.

Plus, now that I can instantly move to any location I've already been to, the range of my exploration has been widened accordingly.

As part of my increasingly active travels, I found a huge passage even Mother would probably be able to pass through.

Of course, since I saw Mother going down into the Lower Stratum with my own eight eyes, she wouldn't be up here now.

But what I did find up here is an earth wyrm.

It looked more like a dinosaur than a dragon, and it was about as strong as the eels in the Middle Stratum.

But an eel-class monster is no big deal to me now.

I restrained it easily with thread and sucked its life dry with my Evil Eyes.

Out of all its stats, only its stamina was absurdly high, so that alone was enough to completely fill up my Satiation stock.

So, since I didn't really need to eat after that, I made a simple home on the spot to keep it nice and preserved.

Since then, I've just been teleporting to that spot to have a nibble whenever I get hungry.

Today, when I got hungry and teleported back to the earth wyrm, there were some humans wandering around.

I was suuuuper-surprised.

Without thinking, I froze on the spot and ended up making eye contact with this foppish older guy.

He was a stoic-looking fella, the type who'd seem cool smoking a cigarette.

Being the angel I am, I hurriedly turned off my Evil Eyes.

If I had kept staring at him with my Evil Eyes still active, the world would be down one stoic dude, just like that.

Apparently, the humans were just as surprised as I was.

My Intimidation skill was definitely working on them.

They suddenly shouted and took off running, so I guess they were fleeing from me, huh?

Hmm. Better that than them suddenly attacking me, sure, but

still...

They were kinda dressed like knights, so they should've been fairly capable warriors, right?

But they got scared by my Intimidation and ran off.

Is it me, or does that mean I'm going to cause a huge panic if I leave the labyrinth?

I mean, if that's how hardened warriors react to me, are ordinary people gonna faint on the spot if they see me or what?

I'm starting to get the feeling that even if I evolve into an arachne or pick up Telepathy or whatever, my efforts are gonna be wasted.

Either way, I can't picture things going very smoothly.

It works out fine for me that those knights ran away, but what if they had tried to take me on or something?

I mean, they probably ran away because they weren't super-strong, but if I meet any humans who are confident in their own strength, they might try to conquer their fears and challenge me.

It might even be possible that a human stronger than me exists.

Judging by those knights, humans seem to be weaker than I imagined, but I feel like it's dangerous to assume that this early.

I mean, I started out really weak, and look at me now. It's not impossible that a human being could do the same.

In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if there's a huge variety in strength among individual humans.

I'm sure the average villager and a soldier have totally different stats, for one thing.

But I don't really know anything about the humans in this world, so this is all just speculation.

The best way to find out more would be to make contact with humans, but the problem is that I can't do that in the first place.

Even if I tried to use Telepathy, if those knights' yelling is anything to go by, I think they must speak a different language here...

If I want to talk to humans, I'd have to learn this world's language, but to learn the language, I'd have to make contact with humans, which means I'd have to talk to them... Ahh, it's a total catch-22.

Yep. I have a feeling that communicating with humans is gonna be next to impossible.

A few days after my encounter with the knights, I stiiiii haven't evolved.

Man, there are waaay too few monsters around here.

It feels like I've been stalled just before the finish line, y'know?

So of course I'm starting to get annoyed about how few monsters there are.

My home's defense is flawless, and I still have the earth wyrm for food, so all I need now is experience points.

The table is set, so where's the EXP?!

Oh, wait, I just found it pretty easily.

EXP, or rather, a monster.

It's a snake.

That thing's one of the stronger monsters in the Upper Stratum, so if I beat it, I should level up and be able to evolve.

But there's just one little problem.

The snake is fighting some humans.

There are two humans facing the snake head-on.

Then two more injured ones lying a short distance away.

One more person is healing those two.

So five humans in total.

Judging by the view of the situation I've got with Clairvoyance, they're probably adventurers who were attacked by the snake, I guess?

Hmm.

I can't use Clairvoyance and Appraisal at the same time, but at a glance, I feel like maybe the snake is stronger?

So those two people alone can't beat a snake, huh...?

Oh, since there are two people down already, I guess it was just five people to begin with.

Man, I guess humans really are weaker than I thought.

Ahh, what should I do?

I could probably muscle in and nab the snake myself, but if I do that, I'll get mixed up with the humans.

It'd be a pain if they freaked out like those knights did before.

But if I just leave them be, it looks like those humans are gonna get wiped out.

But I mean, that's fine, isn't it?

Why don't I just wait for the snake to wipe them out, then beat the snake myself?

That way I don't need to get involved with humans at all.

...Yeah, I guess I can't do that, huh?

As a former human and all, it doesn't quite sit right with me.

Yeah, I know, I don't exactly have the nicest personality, but I do understand basic moral principles, you know?

Although whether I act accordingly with those principles is another story.

It's just, I dunno. I can't bring myself to let them die just 'cause it would be kind of a pain, so I guess even I have a teensy little bit of a conscience.

I guess I'm gonna save them, then.

You guys are lucky I'm so incredibly selfless.

Dash!

I'm not going to make a show of rescuing them or anything like that.

I'm just gonna kill this thing and get outta here.

I don't wanna stick around in case things go south.

And so, Mr. Snake, I'll have to ask you to take your leave.

It only takes a moment for me to reach the place I've been watching with Clairvoyance.

I use Dimensional Maneuvering to hop right onto the head of the snake.

Then I swing my scythe. I've added Cutting Enhancement, stat boosts, and Deadly Poison Attack on top.

My scythe pierces right through the crown of the snake's head before it even realizes I'm there.

Just like that, the snake's HP is instantly reduced to 0.

The enormous serpent collapses.

I pull my scythe out of the snake's head and shake off the blood.

Another one bites the dust.

I can't believe I used to think of these guys as boss monsters.

<Experience has reached the required level. Individual Zoa Ele has increased from LV 19 to LV 20.>

<All basic attributes have increased.>

<Skill proficiency level-up bonus acquired.>

<Proficiency has reached the required level. Skill [Faint Resistance LV 3] has become [Faint Resistance LV 4].>

<Skill points acquired.>

<Condition satisfied. Individual Zoa Ele can now evolve.>

<There are multiple options for evolution. Please choose from the following.

- Ede Saine
- Greater taratect
- Orthocadinaht

>

Sweet! I finally leveled up!

Now I can finally evolve.

All righty, looking at the adventurers (or whatever), it appears they're still frozen with shock.

Well, I can't say I blame them.

Guess I'll just grab this snake and be on my way via teleportation, then.

Ah, but...it looks like the two passed-out humans back there are going to die.

The snake's poison is taking a real toll on them.

The healer guy is doing his best, but his speed and power are too

low.

At this rate, they'll die faster than he can heal them.

Hmm. Well, I already came this far.

If I'm gonna do it, might as well do it right.

I teleport over to the two fallen humans.

The man doing the healing is so surprised by my sudden appearance that he messes up midspell, but it's not like it was doing that much good anyway, so whatever.

I activate Healing Magic.

Then I use status recovery and HP recovery magic on each of them.

Since I used it a lot while I was training my Fire Resistance, my Healing Magic skill level is stronger now.

So this degree of injuries and poison is no sweat.

Watching me work, the man who was doing the healing bugs his eyes out.

Ahh, I really don't wanna get involved any further than this.

You guys are on your own after this, got it?

I go back to the corpse of the snake, intending to get out of here for real this time.

Then my eyes happen to fall on something miraculous.

Fruit.

It looks sort of like dried persimmons.

Oh-hoooooo?!

Sweets?!

Those are sweets, right?!

Did these guys drop them while they were fighting?!

Can I take these?! I can, right?! Whatever, I'm taking 'em!

Finally! I got some sweets!

Wooo! I might even be happier about this than about leveling up!

I'm so psyched, I practically skip over to the snake.

The adventurers (or whatever) are still dumbfounded, so I grab the snake and teleport away for real this time.

Home, sweet home.

Okay, I've gotta try this fruit I just got.

Evolution? Whatever, that can wait.

First I gotta focus all my energy on enjoying the heck out of my very first dessert in my life as a spider!

Taste Enhancement, full throttle!

And why not Olfactory Enhancement, while we're at it!

First, I'm just gonna gaze at it in appreciation for a while.

Might as well Appraise it, too.

<Dried Krikta Fruit>

<Krikta: A plant that grows extensively across the continent of Kasanagara. It flowers regularly and produces fruit. The fruit has a sweet taste and restores a small

amount of MP.>

Ooh. So this fruit is no ordinary snack.

It recovers MP, too.

If those humans were carrying these for MP recovery, then it might've been bad of me to take them.

But I mean, I did heal them when they were about to die and all, so I don't think they can complain if I take a couple fruits.

It's fine, it's fine. Just think of it as payment for my services.

Now then, gotta take a deep breath.

Huff... Whew. Okay!

I'm gonna try it!

...Sweet.

Ah, it's sweet.

It's so, so sweet.

Compared with the fruits I ate in my previous life, it's a little astringent and not especially delicious.

And since it's dried, it's obviously not very juicy.

But still, it's sweet.

This is the first time I've tasted anything sweet since I became a spider.

So sweet.

So tasty.

Soooo happy!

I eat slowly and carefully.

Savoring the flavor.

Right down to the last bite.

Whew. That was pretty good.

There's really nothing like a proper dessert.

I should definitely appreciate how delicious that was, no questions asked.

No use getting into a weird mood about it.

If I get out of the labyrinth, I'll be able to get more tasty foods like this. I really gotta light a fire under my butt about aiming to evolve into an arachne.

So while that stage might not be in reach just yet, it's time to take one step closer by evolving now.

Unlike when I evolved in the Middle Stratum, this time I'm totally prepared.

I'm safe and secure, and I have food supplies.

No problems there.

If there is one thing I'm worried about, though, it's that I'm afraid Taboo is going to get maxed out with this next evolution.

Taboo... Ugh.

I get the feeling something's gonna happen when it maxes out, but

even with the power of Wisdom, I have no idea what that might be.

It's probably gonna be bad, right?

Well, I don't think I can avoid it for much longer anyway, so I guess I'll just have to accept it, whatever it is.

I just hope it's not instant death or some irreversible penalty or anything.

Hmm.

Well, it's certainly scary, but I kinda think it's not gonna be anything *that* bad.

I mean, my other mystery skills like Pride and stuff have worked out great so far.

Maybe it'll end up being a huge power boost with no disadvantages at all.

Okay, I don't think that's gonna happen. But since D seems to enjoy watching me struggle along so much, I doubt it's gonna be a sudden death penalty.

I think D would rather leave me alive so I can keep providing entertainment.

Huh? Wait, what if that means I'm going to meet with a fate worse than death?

...Better not think about that.

Not like there's anything I can do about it anyway.

I'll just have to cross that bridge when I come to it. There's no other choice, really.

This time, I have three options for evolution.

Greater taratect would bring me back to the original taratect line.

I saw one of those in the Lower Stratum.

I guess they're probably strong, but I have no intention of taking that route.

I'd get bigger, for one thing.

One of the evolutionary conditions for arachne is that you have to be a small- or medium-size spider-type monster, so if I evolve into a big ol' greater taratect, I won't be able to evolve into an arachne anymore.

So, greater taratect is out.

That leaves two options. Ede Saine and Orthocadinaht.

<Ede Saine: Evolution Requirements: Zoa Ele LV 20. Description: A small spider-type monster feared as an omen of death. Has incredibly high combat and stealth capabilities.>

<Orthocadinaht: Evolution Requirements: Spider-type monster with stats above a certain amount, magic-type skill(s). Description: A spider-type monster that specializes in magic. Has high intelligence and is capable of advanced strategies such as setting traps.>

Orthocadinaht is a magic type, and Ede Saine is the higher evolution of Zoa Ele.

But I don't think Orthocadinaht would be very useful.

I think it unlocked because I've got Height of Occultism and Celestial Power, but to be honest, it seems like a crappy option to me. Sure, it's supposed to be smart, but that's by monster standards. I've been using traps since the moment I was born, y'know. Besides, Orthocadinaht doesn't evolve. So that'd be the end of the line.

Looking at my evolution tree, it doesn't seem to be a particularly powerful monster, so I'm not exactly impressed.

Now, Ede Saine, that's another story.

It's not the end of its evolutionary line, but judging by the tree, it seems to be just a step below Mother's degree of power.

The evolution tree is arranged so that you can tell how a monster ranks to a certain extent by how high its name is listed.

And this name is just one step down from an evolution that seems to be very nearly on par with queen taratect, which I think it's safe to assume is my mother's species.

Ede Saine.

It's way higher in the monster power rankings than the other two evolution options.

So, obviously, Ede Saine is the only way to go.

Man, without Wisdom to show me the evolution tree, I might not've known what to do.

Thank you, Professor Wisdom!

By the way, since arachne is a special evolution, it's separate from the rest of the tree.

Its evolutionary conditions are being a small or medium spider monster, having the Pride skill, and being level 50 or above.

That's pretty crazy.

So I guess I'm pretty crazy for trying to reach it.

<Individual Zoa Ele will evolve into Ede Saine.>

All right, evolution start!

Just like that, my consciousness fades away.

<Proficiency has reached the required level. Skill [Taboo LV 9] has become [Taboo LV 10].>

<Condition satisfied. Activating the effect of Taboo. Information now installing.>

<Installation complete.>

...Good morning.

.....

Well, don't I feel like shit now.

Taboo, huh?

Yeah, I guess this probably is taboo to the people of this world.

I mean, if a native inhabitant found out all this information, they'd probably go insane, right?

Why drag me into all this, though?

This has got to be D's doing.

That's the only explanation.

Man, what an asshole.

It's D's fault I was reborn into this world that's on the brink of collapse.

Weren't there any other options to be reborn into?

Sure, a world with skills and stats and all is very gamelike, but who would ever suspect there's such a sick secret behind it?

Sure, it's unusual, but anyone would just assume that's how this world works.

Who in their right mind would imagine that a stupid game-y system like this is actually in place in order to save the world?

D must be one hell of a hardcore gamer to make something like this.

Now that I know about all this, I can't just go on as if nothing's changed.

I've gotta take action.

But what can I do? Massacre a bunch of humans and monsters?

No way.

Whether I'm capable of that or not, Administrator Güliedistodiez would never allow it.

In retrospect, that dark man I met when D's smartphone appeared must have been Administrator Güliedistodiez.

At the time, D forbade him from meddling with me and chased him off, but if I go too far, I bet anything he wouldn't let D stop him again.

Otherwise, I'm sure they wouldn't have just let the world fall into this situation.

Which means no massacring for me.

Not that I really wanted to do that in the first place.

In that case, there's only one way forward.

I have to improve my skills and get stronger.

Stats and skills are really nothing more than temporary powers granted as part of the system.

But I'll find a way to sublimate that temporary power into the real thing.

In the end, I guess I'm doing exactly what D wants.

I think D might've reincarnated me into this world knowing this would happen.

So that's why I have the " $n\% I = W$ " skill.

I'll have to keep doing everything according to that annoying D's

plans.

To be honest, the fact that I'm playing into D's hands really pisses me off.

How much, you ask?

<Proficiency has reached the required level. Acquired skill [Wrath LV 1].>

That's how much.

Ugh, I'm so mad!

I hate being forced into something by someone else more than anything else!

But as much as it irritates me, I have to do exactly that.

Otherwise, I'd just be committing a double suicide with this collapsing mess of a world.

I'll take a hard pass on that, thanks.

I know this is going to be a pretty difficult road, but I can't simply give up without even trying.

I mean, maybe this world isn't going to collapse nearly as soon as I think.

But if I take my chances on a faint hope like that, I'd just be cutting myself off from my only path forward.

Even if it's one laid out for me by someone else.

Maybe I should even be thanking D for setting up a path for me like this.

But knowing that super-ultra-hyper-mega-twisted rotten jerk, I bet D's watching me right this very moment and getting a good laugh about it!

Really, if you're gonna go and give me a path to salvation, maybe try not reincarnating me into a world that's about to collapse in the first place!

I mean, I guess if it's between that and not being reborn at all, I'd pick this option with a "thank you very much," but still!

I should probably be grateful, but I'm more irritated than anything! Argh, I hate this stupid feeling!

If even this feeling was part of the plan, then D really is an evil god.

A horrible evil god who has fun by toying with people's minds.

Whew.

All right, I feel a little better now.

But there's still a lot of stress built up inside me.

Guess I'll take it out on some monsters.

I'm going into the Lower Stratum to do some level grinding.

I'm not gonna gripe about being scared of some stupid earth dragon anymore.

I'm going to level up for all I'm worth.

That way, I can build up enough power to bid this world farewell.

Looks like my ultimate goal has gone past arachne to one step further.

EDE SAINÉ

LV.01

status

HP  800 / 800MP  800 / 800SP  800 / 800 800 / 800

Average Offensive Ability : 400

Average Defensive Ability : 400

Average Magic Ability : 400

Average Resistance Ability : 400

Average Speed Ability : 400

skill

[Spider Thread LV 5]

[Cutting Enhancement LV 5]

[Shadow Magic LV 5]

[Poison Fang LV 5]

[Stealth LV 5]

[Poison Resistance LV 5]

[Rot Attack LV 5]

[Silence LV 5]

A spider-type monster feared as an omen of death. It's said that the moment you encounter this terrifying creature, your fate is sealed. Because there are so few living witnesses, it is difficult to assess its precise danger level. It is estimated to be at least level B.



BATTLE IN THE CAPITAL

Fei flies above the royal capital, carrying us on her back.

Her flight is surprisingly stable for someone who only just evolved and gained the skill.

Even with three people riding her, it feels safe.

Still, at this speed, you'd definitely get shaken off if you weren't holding on tight.

Considering she doesn't even have the High-Speed Flight skill yet, I'm pretty terrified for the future.

I might not be able to ride her at all once she gets that skill.

"There it is."

Squinting into the powerful wind, I look ahead.

There, I can see the castle emerging from the darkness of the night.

Leston and the others are most likely being held captive in there.

Get close to the castle in the air on Fei, then break in.

Rescue our allies and escape.

Our strategy is so plain and simple that it can't really be called a plan, but the fact is, we have no other choice.

If we're going to succeed, we'll need the speed and power to break through.

We should be fine in terms of combat power.

There's me, the hero; Hyrince, who fought constant battles alongside Julius; and Katia, who isn't known as a prodigy for nothing.

Frankly, there probably aren't many humans who could stop us three.

According to our information, Hugo and Sue have already left the castle via Teleport.

If Hugo is back in the Renxandt Empire by now, there shouldn't be anyone left who's strong enough to stand in our way.

The only people I'm worried about are Sophia and those two black-clad fighters.

If that mysterious girl is there, we might be in trouble.

I definitely got a very bad feeling from that girl.

It wasn't just that magic didn't work on her. There was something

disturbingly eerie about her.

To the point where she might even be more dangerous than Hugo. If she's still here, then there might be a difficult battle ahead of us. But that's a big "if."

I don't know why I can't shake off this feeling of anxiety, despite the impressive force of our team.

"Ah! Fei! Watch out!"

As if to confirm my fears, something comes flying toward us at high speed.

Fei hurriedly avoids it, her abrupt movements shaking us around.

"Hold on tight, everyone!"

At her telepathic message, we latch on tightly to Fei's back.

At the same time, Fei's body turns sharply.

The flying object zips right through the space we occupied just moments ago.

"A long-range magic attack?!"

The thing that flew by us was a laser-like magical attack, leaving a trail of light in its wake.

"Impossible! A magic attack that can reach this high?!"

Hyrince exclaims in shock.

We're flying at high altitude.

I don't know how high, exactly, but we've got to be well over half a mile above the ground.

We should barely even be visible from down there.

That's why we planned to infiltrate from above at night.

And yet, someone is sniping at us with absurd accuracy.

"Don't let go, now!"

Fei swerves slightly to the left and right, still moving steadily forward.

Beams of light streak close by Fei, matching her high speed.

She's dodging with as little movement as possible to avoid shaking us off, but the attacks flying past us are terrifyingly close.

This level of accuracy shouldn't be possible, no matter how good the marksman.

The hit rate of a spell gets lower the farther away you are from the target.

I definitely wouldn't be able to land shots from more than half a mile away.

Never mind a moving target like Fei in the low visibility of night.

And yet, Fei's evasive maneuvers are getting more drastic.

She can't afford to worry about us that much now.

In other words, if she doesn't dodge with all her might, she's going to get hit.

It might be partly because we're getting closer, but this is still an unthinkable precise shooter.

“Shun!” Hyrince shouts. “We have to withdraw! If they have a magic user this strong who knows we’re here, then our strategy’s already failed!”

True enough, our original plan was to break in without being noticed, then if we get noticed inside, retreat at top speed while the enemy is still confused.

But that prediction went out the window as soon as we encountered a preemptive attack.

“No, we have to force our way through!”

If we withdraw here, that means Leston and the others will die.

There’s no way I can let that happen.

If we run away with our tails between our legs now, I’ll never be able to call myself a hero again.

“But!”

“Julius would never have given up in a situation like this! Am I wrong?”

Maybe it was unfair to say that to Hyrince.

But we really can’t withdraw now.

“.....Very well.”

Sure enough, Hyrince gives in.

But that doesn’t solve our main problem.

The sniper is still attacking us, and since they already know we’re here, we have to assume they’re fully prepared to intercept us.

As we speed through the air, I activate Clairvoyance to look for the source of the beams.

The mage is on top of the castle ramparts.

He’s exactly the sort of old man you’d picture if you heard the word “wizard.”

“Fei, bring us closer to the castle!”

“Right!”

With Clairvoyance, I keep an eye on the old mage.

The magic shots are being fired at regular intervals from his staff.

But he’s not even breaking a sweat. Despite the incredible power of the spells, he looks as if he’s invoking the most basic of beginner’s magic.

“Crap!”

Hyrince and I simultaneously activate barriers in time with Fei’s frantic cry.

It’s called Wyrms Barrier, a skill that dampens the effects of magic like the scale skills unique to wyrms and dragons.

The skill is very convenient, producing a sort of thin membrane that can even hold up to some physical attacks.

However, you have to defeat a wyrm to be able to acquire it, and it costs no small amount of skill points, too.

On top of that, its effect is weak compared with the original Wyrms

Scales, and it takes a good deal of MP to activate, so its convenience comes at a high price.

The only reason I haven't been using it this whole time is because I'd run out of MP very quickly.

Hyrince and I both use Wyrms Scales, and Fei uses Dragon Scales.

With that much defense, we should be all right even if we take a hit or two.

Or so I thought.

"Ngh!"

I feel blood trickle down my cheek, coupled with a chill running down my back.

The beam penetrated all three barriers and nearly hit my face.

I managed to dodge it by jerking my head out of the way, but it still grazed my cheek a little.

It didn't cause much physical damage.

My Auto-Recovery activates right away, closing the wound.

However, that doesn't change the fact that it nearly hit me.

It pierced through all our defenses, ignoring my resistance entirely.

It's not just an incredibly long-distance spell.

That attack definitely has the power to kill me.

With my stats boosted by the Hero title, a direct hit probably wouldn't kill me.

But what about everyone else?

I never thought I'd so quickly come to regret not taking Hyrince's advice to retreat.

"Shun! You just worry about yourself! I'll protect the lady!"

Hyrince's dependable words melt my fears away.

Of course. Hyrince is a capable defender who protected my brother for years.

If Hyrince says he'll protect her, I'm sure he will.

So I'll trust Hyrince and do whatever I can.

"Fei, charge straight ahead!"

"What?!"

We're still some distance away from the castle.

The distance is slowly closing, but if we keep dodging as we advance, eventually, we'll hit our limit.

The old wizard's accuracy is higher than Fei's evasion abilities.

We can somehow get by at this current distance, but the closer we get, the harder dodging the attacks becomes.

In which case, our only option is to forget about dodging in the first place.

"What do you mean, charge straight ahead?!"

"I'll take care of it. Just trust me and charge ahead!"

Fei hesitates for a moment, then makes up her mind and

accelerates forward.

"Don't blame me if this gets us all killed!"

Our velocity builds up rapidly.

I couldn't tell until now, but it seems like Fei really isn't used to flying yet, since she hasn't trained the skill up at all.

Apparently, flying straight is even more difficult than dodging the beam attacks.

Her speed is infinitely faster than when she was dodging around before.

Another beam fires at us.

I activate the spell I was preparing.

One of the Holy Light Magic spells, Mirror Shield.

It's a counterspell that repels any attack.

A thin white pane of light appears in front of the flying beam, which hits it and bounces off in a different direction.

"Eek!"

Fei lets out a shriek at the sight of the Mirror Shield and the beam of light crashing before her eyes.

Normally, the spell is supposed to reflect the attack back at the opponent, but apparently, it was only able to bounce the beam away due to its sheer power.

Hyrince and I still have our barriers active, yet even with that, I could only deflect the attack.

What an incredible amount of power.

And now we're heading directly for the mage who wields it.

We have no chance of winning in a long-range battle.

If we can't get closer and force a close-combat situation, we'll get hit with that magic at point-blank range.

Another beam flies toward us, and I deflect it in the same way.

As we get closer, the weight of the attacks hitting my Mirror Shield increases accordingly.

Each time, I reinforce the shield with a fresh supply of MP, but I can tell it's not going to last if these attacks keep coming.

Despite the constant onslaught of attacks, the old mage's MP shows no signs of running out.

Honestly, I'd like to give this guy a piece of my mind.

But even that powerful magic and massive MP might still be conquerable if we can get close enough to prevent him from firing magic.

And that chance is coming up right before my eyes.

Physically speaking, that is.

The distance between us and the old wizard is so little now that I don't need Clairvoyance to see him.

Once we're a few dozen feet away, I jump off Fei's back.

"Wha—?!"

Fei's startled exclamation reaches me through Telepathy, but the boom of a magic beam exploding against the Mirror Shield in front of me drowns that out.

Since I've moved away from Hyrince and Fei, my magic defense power's been reduced.

Nevertheless, I put all my strength into the Mirror Shield, knocking the beam away.

Then I let gravity do its work, swinging my sword downward toward the wizard.

"Hmm. Well, I suppose that earns passing marks."

I hear a voice...

...but it's coming from beside me.

My sword cuts through empty air, and when I whirl toward the source of the voice, I see that the old mage has somehow moved several feet away.

Was it an illusion or Teleport via the rare Spatial Magic?

I can't tell, but I definitely can't just stand here defenseless.

Jumping away would be a bad call.

If there's more distance between us, that gives the wizard an advantage.

I'll just have to step forward!

My skill-enhanced thoughts arrive at this conclusion in an instant, so I turn to step toward the wizard.

However, against my will, my legs are forced to move backward instead.

By the countless spells being fired at them.

"Geh... Ugh!"

The magic barrage hits my legs with machine gun-like speed.

Individually, the shots are weaker than the long-distance attacks that were fired at us before.

But there are too many of them!

I use my sword and Mirror Shield to knock them back, but several still break through my barrier to jab into my body.

The damage per shot is low, but you know what they say about many drops of water.

The impact pushes me back one step away from the wizard, then another.

"Yaaaah!"

Suddenly, Hyrince comes leaping down from the sky just as I did.

His sword splits the castle ramparts below.

This time, I see the old man disappear.

Whirling around, I find him standing opposite where he was just moments ago.

Teleport. It's said that the number of people who can use Spatial

Magic can be counted on one hand.

It's still far from even my grasp, yet this terrifying mage can use it freely.

Hyrince and I square off against him.

At the same time, Fei comes back around, menacing the old wizard from the sky.

On her back is Katia, fully prepared to use magic.

"Oh dear... This is too much. You got me, you got me. This old man is retreating."

With that, the wizard teleports away.

I search for signs of his presence, but he doesn't seem to have teleported anywhere nearby.

"Did he really retreat?"

"Decided to let us go, more likely."

I agree with Hyrince.

If that mage was using his full power, I don't know if we could win, even if we all came at him at once.

"That was Master Ronandt. The strongest human mage alive, and Julius's instructor in magic."

That was Julius's master?

The powerful mage who Julius used to say was "a funny sort"...

Did he decide to spare us because I'm Julius's brother?

"I guess...I still have a long way to go."

I don't know why he decided to let us live.

But I feel like he showed me there's always someone stronger than you.

Hugo, that girl Sophia, the little white girl who killed Julius—
—will I ever be able to surpass them?

"Let's go."

I shake my head, pushing down the anxiety welling up inside me.

Fei lands on top of the ramparts, letting Katia down.

There are no signs of anyone else nearby.

If no one came running to see what was causing all the noise, that probably means a trap is lying in wait for us.

But we still have to go.

"Fei, wait here. If anything happens, I'll let you know with Telepathy."

"Okay."

Leaving Fei on the ramparts, we walk into the dark of the castle.

LV.01

LIGHT DRAGON
FEIRUNE

status

HP

3489 / 3489

MP

3433 / 3433

SP

3481 / 3481

3485 / 3485

Average Offensive Ability : 3562

Average Defensive Ability : 3601

Average Magic Ability : 3411

Average Resistance Ability : 3478

Average Speed Ability : 3464

skill

[Light Wym LV 9] [Earth Wym LV 9] [Imperial Scales LV 5] [Hard Armor LV 2] [Steel Body LV 2] [Iron Defense LV 10]
 [Flight LV 1] [HP Rapid Recovery LV 3] [MP Rapid Recovery LV 1] [MP Minimized Consumption LV 1]
 [SP Rapid Recovery LV 2] [SP Minimized Consumption LV 2] [Magic Power Perception LV 10] [Precise Magic Power
 Operation LV 1] [Light Attack LV 1] [Light Enhancement LV 1] [Super Earth Attack LV 3] [Earth Super-Enhancement LV 6]
 [Heavy Super-Attack LV 2] [Heavy Super-Enhancement LV 1] [Destruction Super-Enhancement LV 3] [Cutting Enhancement LV 8] [Impact Super-
 Enhancement LV 4] [Piercing Super-Enhancement LV 2] [Shock Super-Enhancement LV 1] [Magic Warfare LV 8] [Magic Power Conferment LV
 7] [Magic Power Attack LV 7] [Mental Warfare LV 7] [Energy Conferment LV 6] [Energy Attack LV 6] [Shieldsmanship LV 6] [Athletics LV 4]
 [Acceleration LV 10] [Leadership LV 2] [Telepathy LV 5] [Spatial Maneuvering LV 4] [Hit LV 10] [Evasion LV 10] [Probability Correction LV 4]
 [Stealth LV 10] [Camouflage LV 2] [Intimidation LV 7] [Concentration LV 10] [Thought Acceleration LV 2] [Foresight LV 2] [Danger Perception LV 10]
 [Presence Perception LV 10] [Light Magic LV 1] [Earth Magic LV 10] [Terrain Magic LV 8] [Heretic Magic LV 4] [Poison Magic LV 1] [Healing Magic
 LV 10] [Heavy Magic LV 8] [Destruction Resistance LV 4] [Cutting Resistance LV 4] [Impact Resistance LV 4] [Piercing Resistance LV 4] [Shock
 Resistance LV 4] [Fire Resistance LV 4] [Water Resistance LV 6] [Ice Resistance LV 5] [Wind Resistance LV 4] [Terrain Nullification] [Lightning
 Resistance LV 4] [Heavy Resistance LV 8] [Acid Resistance LV 4] [Holy Light Nullification] [Dark Resistance LV 4] [Status Condition Resistance LV
 4] [Faint Resistance LV 7] [Fear Super-Resistance LV 3] [Pain Nullification] [Pain Super-Mitigation LV 3] [Five Senses Super-Enhancement LV 2]
 [Vision Expansion LV 1] [Night Vision LV 2] [Clairvoyance LV 4] [Ultimate Life LV 1] [Ultimate Magic LV 1] [Ultimate Strength LV 1] [Fortune LV 1]
 [Fortitude LV 2] [Stronghold LV 2] [Deva LV 1] [Sanctum LV 1] [Skanda LV 1] [Overeating LV 3] [Taboo LV 4] [a% 1 = W]

The special evolved form of the reincarnation Fei, due to her contract with the hero Shun. While still possessing the powers she had as an earth wyrm, she gains the Light attribute and wings. Because she is a reincarnation, her powers exceed those of a dragon, despite her being only a wyrm.



Interlude

THE ELDERLY MAGE AND THE RULER

“And where have you been?”

As soon as I come back, a particularly nasty face confronts me.

“I can go wherever I please, I’m sure.”

“I suppose. Then I can do whatever I wish too, then, no?”

The little girl gives me a smile that’s barbed with meaning.

For the first time in many a year, a slight feeling of fear rises within me.

“I do consider you quite valuable, you know? So much so that it seems a waste that you are a mere human.”

Oh-ho, I don’t like the look in this girl’s eyes.

Even as she claims to value me, she’s looking at me like a predator who’s locked on to its prey.

“Ah-ha. What an honor.”

“Indeed. But since you are so valuable, that also means I have to keep an eye on you. It matters not what the rabble might attempt, but you are another story. Seriously, make a wrong move, and I’ll have to crush you.”

The girl takes a single step forward.

I take a step back and surreptitiously begin preparing a spell.

“Just kidding.”

The girl turns lightly on her heel and begins walking away from me.

“Just don’t try anything funny. Not that anything you do could stop Master’s plan anyway.”

“Then nothing I do should cause a problem, no?”

“Oh? Even if it doesn’t cause a problem, it could still be an annoyance, you know. Why, if you caught me by surprise, you might even be able to land a single hit on me.”

Having said her piece, the girl strolls away.

What a shocking thing to say to the strongest human mage.

That petulant little lass really raked me over the coals, again.

However, she’s not necessarily wrong.

As near as I can tell, there is a significant difference in combat power between us.

If I fought her, I'd almost certainly be the first to go down.

I may be the strongest human mage, but that's only saying so much, in the end.

I cannot hope to compete with inhuman monsters, in the truest sense of the word.

I already learned that lesson long ago.

That there is always someone stronger, and there are walls I cannot surmount.

Therein lies the problem.

The fact is that I've started to want to teach my late disciple's younger brother.

If that boy cannot surpass me, then there is no hope.

But unlike me, that boy—the real hero—is still young.

He will surely become stronger with time.

Now, will that hero be able to overcome the wall that I could not?

And if he does, will he be able to surpass that little girl, and the “master” who lurks behind her?

That girl, Sophia.

The moment Appraisal failed to work on her, I knew she was no ordinary person.

The problem is that even I cannot see through to what she really is.

And this terrifying girl has someone she calls “Master.”

The most powerful creature I know of is “that master,” but it could be that this girl's so-called Master is on the same level.

And if so, will any human be able to put up a fight?

Prince Hugo, who rules an empire with an iron fist.

And the figure manipulating him in the shadows.

Now, how should I move amid all this?

Perhaps I should heed the girl's warning and lie low for a while yet.



THE EARTH DRAGONS OF THE LOWER STRATUM

I eat.

And eat.

And eat.

I'm no longer making any effort to hide it.

I bite down heartily and suck up the insides.

So that I can eat it all up.

<Proficiency has reached the required level. Skill [Satiation LV 3] has become [Satiation LV 4].>

<Proficiency has reached the required level. Skill [Divinity Expansion LV 5] has become [Divinity Expansion LV 6].>

I went on a rampage in the Lower Stratum.

I was trying to vent all the anger built up inside me.

Weak monsters, strong monsters, I hunted them down equally.

In the process, I had an unexpected reunion.

Earth dragon Kagna.

The second earth dragon I met in the Lower Stratum.

Huh? You wanna know if I fought it?

Buddy, take a look at its stats and then try asking me that again.

<Earth dragon Kagna LV 26

~~Status~~ 33/4,698 (blue)

~~SP~~: 22,985/23,982 (red)

~~Average Offensive Ability~~: 3,333 (details)

~~Average Magical Ability~~: 880 (details)

~~Average Speed Ability~~: 1,225 (details)

Skills:

[Earth Dragon LV 2] [Imperial Scales LV 9] [Hard Armor LV 8]
[HP Rapid Recovery LV] [MP Recovery Speed LV] [MP Lessened

[Steel Body LV 8]
[Magic Power

[6]	2]	Consumption LV 2]	Perception LV 3]
[Magic Power Operation LV 3]	[SP Recovery Speed LV 1]	[SP Lessened Consumption LV 1]	[Terrain Enhancement LV 8]
[Destruction Enhancement LV 8]	[Piercing Enhancement LV 6]	[Impact Super-Enhancement LV 5]	[Magic Power Attack LV 1]
[Terrain Attack LV 9]	[Hit LV 3]	[Danger Perception LV 10]	[Heat Perception LV 6]
[Earth Magic LV 2]	[Destruction Resistance LV 9]	[Cutting Super-Resistance LV 2]	[Piercing Super-Resistance LV 3]
[Impact Super-Resistance LV 6]	[Shock Super-Resistance LV 4]	[Terrain Nullification]	[Fire Resistance LV 3]
[Lightning Resistance LV 7]	[Water Resistance LV 3]	[Wind Resistance LV 5]	[Heavy Resistance LV 2]
[Status Condition Super-Resistance LV 8]	[Rot Resistance LV 3]	[Pain Nullification]	[Pain Super-Mitigation LV 3]
[Vision Enhancement LV 3]	[Night Vision LV 10]	[Vision Expansion LV 4]	[Auditory Enhancement LV 1]
[Ultimate Life LV 2]	[Magic Hoard LV 3]	[Instant Body LV 1]	[Endurance LV 1]
[Herculean Strength LV 9]	[Stronghold LV 2]	[Monk LV 2]	[Sanctum LV 1]
[Acceleration LV 1]			

Skill Points: 31,200

Titles:

[Monster Slayer]	[Monster Slaughterer]	[Dragon]	[Champion]
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No way in hell!

With those skills, this thing's defense is way too perfect.

It's basically a walking castle.

Sure, my stats are a little lopsided, too, but these skills are totally specialized in defense.

To start with, we've got the default dragon skill, Imperial Scales, which grants high defense and magic-canceling power.

Then, throw in Hard Armor and Steel Body for even higher defense.

Both are constantly active skills that simply raise your defense.

Thanks to those, its already high defense power is skyrocketed even more.

And THEN, there's that huge mess of resistance skills.

I don't think I could put a dent in this thing.

The most annoying of those resistances is Status Condition Super-Resistance.

It's an advanced version of the Status Condition Resistance skill the fire dragon had.

My main weapon is status condition attacks, so this is the worst possible scenario for me.

And it's level 8, so pretty much no status condition is gonna work.

Poison, Paralysis, Curse, the whole shebang.

Oh yeah, apparently curses are categorized as status conditions.

Which means most of my Evil Eye skills won't do anything, either.

Even putting that aside, the fact that poison won't work seriously sucks.

I've always relied on poison, since the day I was born.

Not being able to use it is kind of a shock.

I've even brought down monsters with Poison Resistance before, but now, for the first time, my opponent's defense is just too damn high.

It's not like I wouldn't be able to do any damage at all, but whatever I do manage would be healed up by HP Rapid Recovery in the blink of an eye.

Status conditions won't work.

So what about physical attacks? Well, that's even less likely.

My meager attack power could never break through that fortresslike defense.

Rot Attack might just do some damage, I guess, but whatever injuries my scythes could possibly cause would be like papercuts on Kagna's giant body.

And Rot Attack is like a suicide bomb, so I can use it only once each with my left and right scythes.

Bring down that defense-heavy beast with two attacks?

Yeah, not gonna happen.

Percentage-wise, it'd probably damage me more than it would my target.

Even if I managed to break through its defense that way and do some damage, it'd still heal pretty quickly thanks to HP Rapid Recovery.

It seems pretty unfair for something with that high defense to also have a recovery skill.

Thanks to that, attacks from my Heavy Evil Eye won't mean much, either.

If physical attacks and status conditions won't work, then magic is my only option.

I guess I should count myself lucky that it doesn't have a resistance for my best kind of magic, Dark.

But if I try to shave it down with that, its recovery and high defense might help it survive.

In which case, it might acquire the resistance skill partway through the battle, and its recovery could even start to outweigh the damage again.

If that happened, that'd be the end of it.

But, well, my magic stats are pretty crazy high, so I do think I could wear it all the way down.

The problem is, it could end up destroying me before I finish the job.

Looking at its skills, I'm guessing that Kagna's strategy is to use the brute strength of its enormous body.

It does have the breath attack from the Earth Dragon skill and some low-level Earth Magic, but other than that, it doesn't seem to have any major attack-based skills.

You could even say that those are its only long-distance attack options.

But wait! Don't be so hasty.

Because it's so giant, its body itself is basically one big weapon.

I mean, picture it.

A huge dragon charging at tiny little me, wanting to crush me underfoot.

Yikes.

Plus, its speed is 1,225, much higher than most of the monsters around here.

It just seems low because all its other stats are so high.

Of course, I pride myself on my speed, so it wouldn't be able to catch up with me, but still.

This is all assuming there's only one opponent.

<Earth dragon Gehre LV 24

Status 1/2,556 (blue)

SP: 430/674 (red)

Average **Offensive Ability**: 3,474 (details)

Average **Magic Ability**: 3,439 (details)

Average Speed Ability: 4,122 (details)

Skills:

[Earth Dragon LV 2]	[Imperial Scales LV 6]	[Hard Armor LV 2]	[Steel Body LV 2]
[HP Rapid Recovery LV 3]	[MP Recovery Speed LV 1]	[MP Lessened Consumption LV 1]	[Magic Power Perception LV 3]
[Magic Power Operation LV 3]	[SP Rapid Recovery LV 3]	[SP Minimized Consumption LV 3]	[Terrain Enhancement LV 8]
[Destruction Enhancement LV 9]	[Cutting Super-Enhancement LV 8]	[Piercing Super-Enhancement LV 4]	[Impact Super-Enhancement LV 8]
[Magic Attack LV 1]	[Terrain Attack LV 8]	[Dimensional Maneuvering LV 5]	[Hit LV 10]
[Evasion LV 10]	[Probability Correction LV 7]	[Danger Perception LV 8]	[Presence Perception LV 10]
[Heat Perception LV 7]	[Motion Perception LV 8]	[Earth Magic LV 2]	[Destruction Resistance LV 4]
[Cutting Resistance LV 8]	[Piercing Resistance LV 8]	[Impact Resistance LV 9]	[Shock Resistance LV 5]
[Terrain Nullification]	[Lightning Resistance LV 3]	[Status Condition Super-Resistance LV 3]	[Rot Resistance LV 1]
[Pain Nullification]	[Pain Mitigation LV 7]	[Vision Enhancement LV 7]	[Night Vision LV 10]
[Vision Expansion LV 5]	[Auditory Enhancement LV 5]	[Olfactory Enhancement LV 4]	[Taste Enhancement LV 3]
[Longevity LV 9]	[Magic Hoard LV 1]	[Ultimate Movement LV 2]	[Fortune LV 1]

Skill Points: 31,000**Titles:**

[Monster Slayer]

[Monster Slaughterer]

[Dragon]

[Champion]

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So, like, Kagna was, oh, I dunno, with another dragon.

Seriously, what the hell?

Unreal.

Who does that?

Of course I immediately ran away with Teleport.

I had no other choice, obviously.

I mean, how was I supposed to win that?

As if Kagna the walking fortress wasn't enough, Gehre's stats and Dimensional Maneuvering skill solidified it as a speed type.

They might as well be carrying a sign that says DO YOU WANT TO DIE?

No waaay.

Earth dragon Gehre was a pretty sleek-looking creature, similar to Araba.

It was huge, sure, but unlike the stout build of Kagna, it had a sharp, fast-looking form.

Plus, its speed stat is over 4,000.

As a bonus, its high perception and Evasion skills mean it would probably be really freaking hard to hit.

Actually, I automatically looked at its speed, but Gehre has pretty high defense, too.

Not as high as Kagna, of course, but it's got high stats, support skills, and lots of resistances, with HP Rapid Recovery to boot.

So even if I did manage to hit it, it probably wouldn't be hurt very much.

What kinda sick joke is this?

And that physical attack power is nothing to sneeze at, either.

Especially those blade things on its front legs.

I get the feeling I'd be sliced in two if it hit me with one of those.

Ziping around at high speed and swinging those blades...yeesh.

And of course, it's got the standard built-in breath attack.

Still, its defense isn't as high as Kagna, so I do think my attacks would connect if I managed to hit it.

Its speed is high and all, but I'm no slouch, either, and I've got higher Evasion and Hit power.

If I'm smart with my strategies, I could probably beat it in a fight.

If it was on its own, that is.

With both of them, Kagna could block all my attacks while Gehre

goes on the offensive.

A pair that covers for each other's weaknesses, like an invincible spear and shield combo.

They'd be difficult enough one-on-one, but both at once in such an ideal combination? Forget about it.

Anyway, I marked 'em both, so I'll wait for them to split up before I make a move.

Marking is one of the effects of Wisdom. It lets me mark targets on my map.

As long as they're marked, I can find their whereabouts no matter where they go.

Although if it's somewhere I don't know, the information is vague, like "somewhere around here."

My map of the Lower Stratum isn't filled up yet, but Kagna's and Gehre's markers stick together like glue.

It doesn't look like they'll be splitting up anytime soon.

Also, when I mark something, I can check its status whenever I want.

So if I keep an eye on that, I can teleport in and attack if I catch them at a weak moment.

Not that I'd imagine a pair of earth dragons to have "weak moments" very often.

By the way, turns out it's impossible to prepare a spell beforehand, teleport, and then immediately release the spell on a target in front of you.

Even if you construct the spell beforehand, it falls apart as soon as you teleport.

It's because of the nature of Teleport, not the user's skill at constructing spells, so there's nothing I can do about that.

Anyway, until those guys split up, I'll go level up somewhere else.

There should still be at least one other earth dragon in the Lower Stratum, so maybe I can take care of that first.

Revenge on Araba, for example.

Thinking back, Araba's the whole reason I'm scared of earth dragons to begin with.

It might not be bad to banish that trauma by beating it.

One-on-one, I think I could probably beat Kagna or Gehre.

In which case, since Araba seems to be a loner, couldn't I beat it, too?

Hmm. Not a bad idea.

Anyway, it'd be dangerous to jump into battle without any preparation, so first I'd like to get a look at its stats.

Judging by Kagna and Gehre, earth dragons aren't the kind of opponent you should just jump in and fight without a plan.

Besides, if I remember correctly, Araba was a higher level than Kagna.

I have to gather some data and come up with a strategy.

Which brings us to the present, back in the Lower Stratum.

I'm currently located near that memorable spot where I first fell down here from the Upper Stratum.

I could've just teleported directly to the bottom of the pit, but it'd be scary to run right into Araba if it's there, so I went for a place a little ways away.

As it turns out, that was a good call.

<Elroe baraggish LV 25

Status: 3,994 (blue)

SP: 3,992 (red)

Average Offensive Ability: 3,825 (details)

Average Magical Ability: 3,995 (details)

Average Speed Ability: 3,827 (details)

Skills:

[Imperial Scales LV 7]	[HP Rapid Recovery LV 4]	[MP Rapid Recovery LV 3]	[MP Minimized Consumption LV 3]
[Magic Power Perception LV 7]	[Magic Power Operation LV 7]	[SP Rapid Recovery LV 4]	[SP Minimized Consumption LV 4]
[Status Condition Super-Enhancement LV 8]	[Strong Acid Enhancement LV 7]	[Heavy Super-Enhancement LV 6]	[Destruction Enhancement LV 9]
[Piercing Super-Enhancement LV 4]	[Impact Super-Enhancement LV 10]	[Shock Super-Enhancement LV 10]	[Magic Power Attack LV 7]
[Deadly Poison Attack LV 10]	[Paralysis Attack LV 6]	[Strong Acid Attack LV 8]	[Heavy Super-Attack LV 8]
[Dimensional Maneuvering LV 1]	[Stealth LV 10]	[Camouflage LV 8]	[Silence LV 10]
[Odorless LV 7]	[Hit LV 10]	[Evasion LV 10]	[Probability Correction LV 8]
[Danger Perception LV 10]	[Presence Perception LV 8]	[Heat Perception LV 10]	[Motion Perception LV 10]
[Heavy Magic LV 5]	[Shadow Magic LV 4]	[Destruction Resistance LV 6]	[Cutting Resistance LV 9]
[Piercing Resistance LV 9]	[Impact Resistance LV 9]	[Shock Resistance LV 5]	[Earth Resistance LV 8]
[Dark Resistance LV 1]	[Status Condition Super-Resistance LV 9]	[Rot Resistance LV 4]	[Pain Nullification]
[Pain Mitigation LV 9]	[Vision Enhancement LV 7]	[Night Vision LV 10]	[Vision Expansion LV 7]
[Auditory Enhancement LV 5]	[Olfactory Enhancement LV 4]	[Taste Enhancement LV 3]	[Longevity LV 9]
[Magic Hoard LV 1]	[Ultimate Movement LV 2]	[Fortune LV 1]	[Herculean Strength LV 8]
[Sturdy LV 9]	[Monk LV 1]	[Talisman LV 8]	[Skanda LV 3]

Skill Points: 37,000

Titles:

[Monster Slayer]	[Assassin]	[Monster Slaughterer]	[Champion]
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This guy looks like serious trouble.

I'm in one of the extra-wide passages in the Lower Stratum, but this thing's huge, long body makes it look tiny and cramped. It's an enormous snake monster, easily a dozen feet long.

It slides along unbelievably smoothly, considering how huge it is, without a single sound thanks to its Silence skill.

Oh, great.

This thing's worse than Kagna or Gehre.

I'd definitely die if I try to fight this thing. No, thank you.

Actually, I mean, I don't think I would necessarily NOT be able to do it, but my odds of winning are probably around half at best.

Based on its shape, I think it might be an evolved form of the snakes from the Upper Stratum.

The snakes were pretty strong for the Upper Stratum, so it's no wonder that their evolved form would be even scarier.

I watch from just within Appraisal distance as the snake slithers away.

It's heading for the pit I was about to go toward.

It'd be bad news if I followed it and ended up getting into a battle, so I think I'll give up on the Araba recon mission for now.

I guess there are still monsters beyond my imagination here in the Lower Stratum. It was good to be reminded of that, probably.

Once it's been long enough since the snake passed by, I'll activate Teleport and go back home.

Even for me and my Height of Occultism skill, it takes a little while to use Teleport.

That thing had tons of perception-type skills, so I'm just gonna wait until it's definitely far enough away that it won't pick up on me using magic.

Boom!

I kinda hear, like...battle sounds?

Slowly peering in the direction the giant snake went, I can see it fighting something verrry far away.

This is the perfect time to use Telescopic Sight!

The image of the giant snake's desperate battle expands to fill my vision.

Then I catch my breath.

It's a dragon.

Darting around, manipulating the earth...an earth dragon.

The snake's body undulates at an unexpected speed for its huge size.

It uses its giant weight and the pull of gravity to slam into its opponent with frightening force.

But the dragon dodges it easily, slipping across the ground and the

air alike.

Spears of earth burst up from the ground, wounding the snake.

Its high defense prevented them from penetrating its skin, but they're still definitely doing damage.

The snake tries to dodge the spears, but they burst out of the ground wherever it touches. With its giant body, it's impossible to avoid them all.

The only way to avoid the attacks of this earth-controlling dragon would be to flee into the air.

But just as I think that, rocks fall from the ceiling.

This is a labyrinth, after all. We're surrounded by earth on all sides, and to this dragon, all of it serves as a potential weapon.

Then the earth dragon uses itself as a weapon, too, charging at the snake.

Those fangs, those claws, and that tail as sharp as a sword.

The serpent is overwhelmed, completely at the mercy of the dragon.

Watching this scene unfold, to me, is beautiful.

That dragon is even stronger than I imagined.

There have been many times when I've thought I couldn't possibly win.

Mother, D, Administrator Güliedistodiez.

However, although I was frightened by their strength, I never yearned for it.

Right now, I am truly yearning for that dragon's power.

I want to surpass it, even.

Even I don't know where this urge is coming from.

But for some reason, I feel like I need to fight it.

I'm not strong enough just yet.

But it's not a height that's beyond my reach.

So I'll keep leveling up and rise to the challenge.

The giant snake gets hit with a breath attack and falls to the ground.

I know that breath very well.

Because, of course, I've experienced it for myself.

Remembering the fear I felt at that time, my body trembles again.

But it's not just fear this time. Part of me is trembling with excitement.

The dragon tramples on the corpse of the snake.

I burn that powerful image into my brain before teleporting away.

I want to carve it into my brain until the day I finally challenge it.

The creature I have to surpass.

The source of my trauma.

The earth dragon Araba.

EARTH DRAGON KAGNA

LV.01

status

Average Offensive Ability : 2871

Average Defensive Ability : 3069

Average Magic Ability : 906

Average Resistance Ability : 3005

Average Speed Ability : 325

HP

3019 / 3019

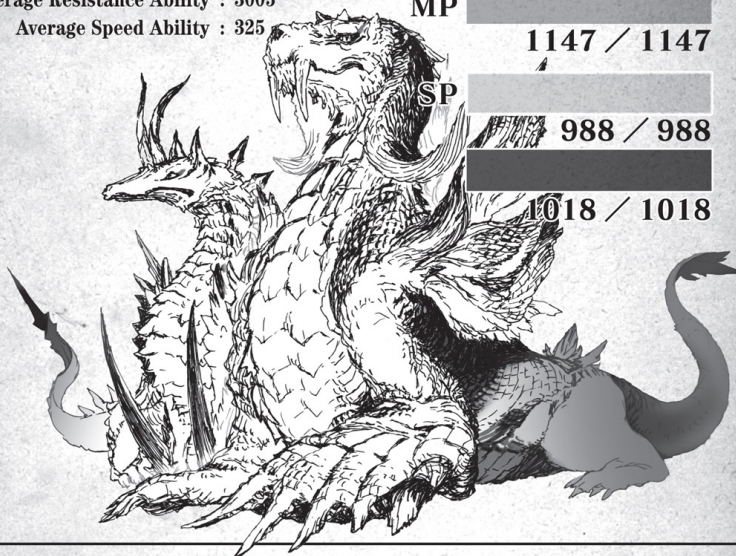
MP

1147 / 1147

SP

988 / 988

1018 / 1018



skill

[Earth Dragon LV 1] [Imperial Scales LV 6] [Hard Armor LV 5] [Steel Body LV 5]
 [HP Rapid Recovery LV 2] [Magic Power Perception LV 1] [Magic Power Operation LV 1]
 [Terrain Attack LV 5] [Terrain Enhancement LV 4] [Destruction Enhancement LV 4]
 [Piercing Enhancement LV 1] [Impact Super-Enhancement LV 2] [Danger Perception LV 10]
 [Heat Perception LV 2] [Earth Magic LV 1] [Destruction Resistance LV 6] [Cutting Resistance LV 8]
 [Piercing Resistance LV 8] [Impact Super-Resistance LV 1] [Shock Resistance LV 9] [Terrain Nullification]
 [Lightning Resistance LV 2] [Wind Resistance LV 1] [Status Condition Super-Resistance LV 4]
 [Rot Resistance LV 1] [Pain Nullification] [Pain Mitigation LV 9] [Night Vision LV 10] [Vision Expansion LV 1]
 [Vision Enhancement LV 1] [Longevity LV 8] [Magic Mass LV 8] [Instantaneous LV 7] [Persistent LV 7]
 [Herculean Strength LV 5] [Sturdy LV 9] [Technique User LV 6] [Talisman LV 8] [Acceleration LV 1]

A kind of earth dragon. Among the already tough earth dragons, this one in particular excels at defense. Because its other abilities are weaker, its primary means of attack is charging with its enormous body. This simplicity is part of what makes it a difficult opponent. Danger level S.

As we enter the castle, it's eerily silent.

Normally, there would be guards stationed throughout, but there's no one to be found, and a stillness even more complete than the quiet of the night outside settles over the castle.

It's as if there's no one inside at all.

In fact, aside from a single point, my Presence Perception isn't picking up on anything.

Except for a single point.

Amid the strange emptiness of the castle, that lone point clearly indicates a presence.

It's almost certainly a trap.

But after coming this far, we can't turn back now.

That Ronandt person decided to spare us, but I'm not so foolishly optimistic to think that whatever's waiting for us in here is going to do the same.

It could be Sophia and the ninjas, or maybe something even worse.

I steady my resolve and head toward the point.

It's in the throne room, which is essentially the heart of the castle.

No conversation passes between us, probably due to the tension.

All around us, we're surrounded by silence so complete, it hurts the ears, and darkness threatens to swallow us whole.

Then we arrive at the throne room.

A majestic room with an intimidating atmosphere, usually reserved for audiences with the king.

"Brother Cylis..."

My older brother Cylis sits on the throne.

And prostrated before him are Leston, Klevea, and Katia's parents.

Four soldiers stand over them, holding swords to their throats.

The soldiers' eyes are empty, devoid of any light or will.

"I am...the king," Cylis declares in a flat voice.

His eyes, like the soldiers', are so clouded that he can't possibly be himself.

Are they brainwashed?

Most likely.

Clearly, though, it's different from the kind that was used on Katia, Anna, and the others.

"This throne...is mine. I...am the king. King..."

Cylis's stuttering voice doesn't contain a single trace of his usual intensity.

"None...who threaten my place...shall live."

The soldiers' swords swing down toward the captives.

We won't reach them in time!

Katia screams.

Hyrince grits his teeth in anguish.

I ignore both of them, running forward and shoving the soldiers away.

Their swords must have been sharp, or else the soldiers were powerful. The heads of the four captives fall to the floor without the slightest resistance.

No human being can survive after having their head cut off.

But if I use my skill, I can save them!

I lift up Leston's fallen head and hold it to his neck.

Then I use the skill I secretly acquired.

The skill called Mercy.

The change is immediate.

Leston's neck reconnects itself, and he begins to breathe again, coming back to life.

<Proficiency has reached the required level. Skill [Taboo LV 5] has become [Taboo LV 6].>

Mercy.

A forbidden skill that resurrects the dead.

This is the skill Katia questioned me about, saying it was no ordinary healing magic. A skill that brings about miracles.

That time, when Katia fired magic at herself to get rid of the brainwashing, she really was mortally wounded.

Her HP dropped to 0, and she died.

However, I used this skill right away and brought Katia back from the dead.

Once I revive Leston, I do the same for Klevea and Katia's parents.

In the process, my MP all but runs out, and my Taboo skill level goes up to 9.

Mercy is probably the only skill in existence that can revive the dead, but it has serious conditions and disadvantages, too.

Firstly, it consumes a large amount of MP.

The only reason I could revive four people was because my skills greatly increased when I became the hero.

Also, if the body is too damaged, it can't be revived.

This time, I was able to reattach the severed heads to their bodies, but if I tried it with only one or the other, it probably wouldn't have worked.

Finally, it's only effective for a short period after the person's death.

I haven't experimented with it, of course, so I don't know exactly how long, but my sense is that it's probably only a few minutes.

Any longer than that, and the skill won't even activate.

Therefore, I won't be able to revive my father, since he's been dead for several days.

It might have been different if I revived him right after he was killed, but I doubt that Hugo and Sophia would have allowed that.

If I could have defeated both of them in the few short minutes while revival was still possible, then I could have saved my father.

Unfortunately, I didn't have the power to do that.

Finally, the biggest disadvantage of all is that the skill level of Taboo rises.

Taboo is a dangerous skill. The Church considers even acquiring it to be just cause for execution.

When I acquired the Mercy skill, I was given this skill, too.

I had to quickly level up my Concealment skill to cover it up.

Yuri always expressed an almost disturbing level of hatred toward the skill.

At the moment, Taboo doesn't affect me negatively in any way.

It's just a matter of how society views it.

However, from what Yuri's hinted at, it seems like something terrible happens if the Taboo skill reaches level 10.

Apparently, even Yuri doesn't know what that is.

She said even having that knowledge would be a great sin in itself.

Since my Taboo skill is level 9 now, that information is very relevant to me.

But even knowing that reviving one more person could bring it to level 10, I don't think I would hesitate to use Mercy if someone precious to me was dying right before my eyes again.

I check that Leston, Klevea, and Katia's parents are all breathing normally, then look toward my brother Cylis on the throne.

There, I see a pitiful figure indeed, mouth hanging half-open and mumbling the word "king" over and over.

The soldiers I knocked over, too, are still lying on the floor despite seemingly being conscious, and they make no move to stand up again.

Hyrince and Katia watched them vigilantly while I was using Mercy, but apparently, that was an unnecessary precaution.

Their minds have been completely destroyed by Hugo's brainwashing.

In the end, Mercy can revive only the body itself.

It can't repair a broken mind.

"Shun, let's go."

Hyrince beckons me to leave Cylis as he is.

"That man wasn't brainwashed when he set you up and killed your father. This is what he deserves."

Even if there's no sign of them now, there are probably more brainwashed soldiers around, not to mention the queen.

On top of that, Sophia could easily show up.

So we're better off escaping than trying to recapture the castle.

But first, we have to check on the teleport point.

A teleport point can warp someone to another registered teleport point.

But the one in the castle is broken.

The other destination point is in the empire, so they probably destroyed it to prevent us from invading.

Once we confirm that the teleport point is broken, we quickly leave the castle.

Leaving my brother Cylis behind.

Fei complains about the extra weight, since we have four more people than we started with, but I don't think she means it.

She flies slowly and carefully, since there are four unconscious people on her back now.

Even though she's making a show of complaining, I can tell by the gentle way she's flying that she's being considerate toward the people she's carrying.

Overwhelmed with relief at her reunion with her parents, who she thought were lost, Katia clings to her unconscious mother and father and weeps.

As for me, I'm still thinking about Cylis.

There was always very little contact between us.

The queen saw me as an enemy, so I rarely interacted with him.

Whenever I did see him, he was always wearing a sullen expression.

Even when we did speak, it was only businesslike greetings or work-related information.

Even though we were brothers, there was a great deal of distance between us.

Still, based on what Julius told me about him, Cylis wasn't always like this.

When he was young, he truly wanted to make the kingdom a better place for its people, just like our father.

But at some point, this turned into an obsession with the position of king, and he became distant from his brothers.

This was probably the influence of his mother, who wanted to put her own son on the throne.

But Julius still seemed to believe that Cylis would regain that pure heart of his youth someday.

And yet, this is how things ended up.

Hyrince says nothing.

He probably had more interactions with Cylis in the past than I did, but his face doesn't reveal his feelings.

“Shun, don't worry about Cylis. He chose his path himself, and that's just how it ended for him. There's no reason for you to feel bad about it.”

Beyond hiding his own feelings on the matter, Hyrince comforts me instead.

With Cylis in that state and my father killed, I don't know what will happen to this kingdom.

But still, we were able to save Leston, Klevea, and Katia's family.

I'm sure we can rebuild this kingdom someday.

I hang on to that hope as we leave the capital.



Interlude

???

“Deviation due to resurrection confirmed.”

“Hmm. That’s fortunate. Otherwise, we would’ve had to take care of it ourselves again.”

“.....”

“In this case, maybe we should have let him resurrect the king, too.”

“.....”

“I know, I know. You think I’m being too soft, right? I entrusted this job to you lot. So I have no intention of criticizing how you go about it.”

“...That is good to hear.”

“Sophia and the others are already on the move, right? I guess the elf village is next.”

“.....”

“Now, I realize you can handle this. I’m not worried. But you know, they don’t live those long lives of theirs for nothing. Don’t let your guard down.”

“.....”



SPIDER VS SPIDER

Dragon shock!

I know it sounds ridiculous, but I'm totally in post-dragon shock.

Once I got back home, the terror sank in, and it took me a whole half a day to recover.

Seeing two earth dragons together when they're already strong on their own...yeah, that had some impact, but I was still fine.

But earth dragon Araba is another story.

How am I ever gonna fight that?

That giant snake, which I already thought was too strong for me, got totally crushed with virtually no effort when it fought Araba.

What's so scary about that? All of it.

The effortless movements that easily dodged all of the serpent's attacks.

Sure, those movements were pretty fast, but even more dangerously, they were precise.

It enacted the optimal evasive action at every given moment, smoothly incorporating its skills along the way.

Unlike the way I bulldoze through everything with the sheer power of my skills, this was more like watching a martial arts master who's honed his movements for many years.

Those magnificent moves had nothing to do with skills or stats. It was pure artistry.

On the flip side, there was the nasty attack method that worked in time with those movements.

Attacking at the same time as dodging.

Not only that, but on top of the flawless "float like a butterfly, sting like a bee" strategy, there was the nightmarish assault of magic chasing the opponent down at the same time.

Isn't it kind of unfair to use Earth Magic inside a labyrinth?

A labyrinth has earthen walls and ceilings, not to mention the ground, you know?

If all that was weaponized and came after you all at once, there's no way you could dodge it.

Since I have Foresight, I might be able to get by, but I'm not

confident I would last very long.

So attacks that come from all sides and leave you no place to run, coupled with flawless evasion based on sheer technique.

Most importantly, there's Araba's own judgment, which commands all that power.

Not to mention, I have no way of telling, since the snake never landed a single attack, but because it's an earth dragon, I'm sure its defensive power is ridiculous.

There's not a single weakness to be found.

How am I supposed to beat that?

I just can't picture myself winning a fair fight against that thing.

Hmm.

In that case, maybe I should come up with a way to make it an unfair fight?

I continued leveling up for several days in the Lower Stratum as I tried to think up strategies to beat Araba.

Right now, I'm in my home, lying in wait.

A group of monsters my Detection picked up on is heading directly this way.

Considering most Upper Stratum monsters run away as soon as they see me, it's very unusual for some to be approaching me.

They're clearly coming this way on purpose, targeting me.

But I suppose I know why.

And I know exactly what they are, too.

The group appears.

Leading the way is an incredibly huge monster.

<Arch taratect LV 31

Status: 2/4,462 (blue) +11400

SP: 4267/4267 (red) 1,288

Average Offensive Ability: 4,395 (details)

Average Magical Ability: 3,040 (details)

Average Speed Ability: 4,237 (details)

Skills:

[HP Rapid Recovery LV 5]	[MP Recovery Speed LV 7]	[MP Lessened Consumption LV 7]	[Magic Power Perception LV 7]
[Magic Power Operation LV 7]	[SP Rapid Recovery LV 2]	[SP Minimized Consumption LV 2]	[Status Condition Super-Enhancement LV 3]
[Destruction Super-Enhancement LV 2]	[Cutting Super-Enhancement LV 4]	[Piercing Super-Enhancement LV 8]	[Impact Super-Enhancement LV 3]
[Shock Super-Enhancement LV 1]	[Magic Power Attack LV 6]	[Magic Warfare LV 4]	[Mental Warfare LV 7]
[Deadly Poison Attack LV 10]	[Poison Synthesis LV 5]	[Threadsmanship LV 5]	[Utility Thread LV 3]
[Thread Control LV 10]	[Telekinesis LV 2]	[Dimensional Maneuvering LV 8]	[Hit LV 10]

[Evasion LV 10]	[Probability Super-Correction LV 2]	[Danger Perception LV 10]	[Presence Perception LV 10]
[Motion Perception LV 10]	[Heretic Magic LV 10]	[Poison Magic LV 10]	[Healing Magic LV 4]
[Destruction Super-Resistance LV 1]	[Cutting Super-Resistance LV 2]	[Piercing Super-Resistance LV 2]	[Impact Super-Resistance LV 4]
[Shock Resistance LV 9]	[Status Condition Super-Resistance LV 8]	[Rot Resistance LV 6]	[Heresy Resistance LV 5]
[Pain Nullification]	[Pain Super-Mitigation LV 2]	[Vision Enhancement LV 10]	[Clairvoyance LV 2]
[Night Vision LV 10]	[Vision Expansion LV 7]	[Auditory Enhancement LV 7]	[Olfactory Enhancement LV 2]
[Tactile Enhancement LV 7]	[Ultimate Life LV 2]	[Magic Hoard LV 8]	[Ultimate Movement LV 1]
[Fortune LV 1]	[Fortitude LV 2]	[Stronghold LV 2]	[Monk LV 7]
[Talisman LV 8]	[Skanda LV 1]	[Satiation LV 4]	[Taboo LV 7]

Skill Points: 34,500

Titles:

[Foul Feeder]	[Kin Eater]	[Monster Slayer]	[Poison Technique User]
[Monster Slaughterer]	[Thread User]	[Monster Calamity]	[Human Slayer]
[Champion]			

>

So strong?!

Why does this SPIDER have higher stats than an earth dragon?!

Okay, well...yeah.

I guess I was expecting this.

This thing looks like a pale, smaller version of Mother. It's probably just one step away from becoming another one of her, so of course it's not gonna be weak.

That's right.

The group of monsters coming to attack me are spiders, just like me.

Technically, since my species has changed via evolution, we're not exactly the same family. But I was originally a taratect, too, so I guess they're sort of like close relatives.

Behind the arch taratect, there are three greater taratects, which are about a size smaller than their leader.

<Greater taratect LV 29

Status 2,845 (blue) + 189

SP: 22839/22839 (red) w/ 786

Average Offensive Ability: 2,766 (details)

Average Magical Ability: 2,990 (details)

Average Speed Ability: 2,744 (details)

Skills:

[HP Rapid Recovery LV 1]	[MP Recovery Speed LV 2]	[MP Lessened Consumption LV 1]	[Magic Power Perception LV 6]
[Magic Power Operation LV 5]	[SP Rapid Recovery LV 1]	[SP Minimized Consumption LV 1]	[Destruction Enhancement LV 8]

[Cutting Enhancement LV 8]	[Piercing Super-Enhancement LV 1]	[Impact Enhancement LV 5]	[Status Condition Enhancement LV 9]
[Mental Warfare LV 4]	[Deadly Poison Attack LV 5]	[Threadsmanship LV 2]	[Spider Thread LV 9]
[Thread Control LV 5]	[Cutting Thread LV 5]	[Poison Synthesis LV 2]	[Dimensional Maneuvering LV 2]
[Hit LV 10]	[Evasion LV 10]	[Probability Correction LV 5]	[Danger Perception LV 10]
[Presence Perception LV 10]	[Motion Perception LV 10]	[Heretic Magic LV 10]	[Poison Magic LV 8]
[Destruction Resistance LV 6]	[Cutting Resistance LV 6]	[Piercing Resistance LV 8]	[Impact Resistance LV 9]
[Shock Resistance LV 5]	[Status Condition Resistance LV 8]	[Rot Resistance LV 3]	[Heresy Resistance LV 1]
[Pain Nullification]	[Pain Mitigation LV 8]	[Vision Enhancement LV 10]	[Telescopic Sight LV 7]
[Night Vision LV 10]	[Vision Expansion LV 5]	[Auditory Enhancement LV 4]	[Olfactory Enhancement LV 4]
[Longevity LV 6]	[Magic Hoard LV 2]	[Instant Body LV 6]	[Endurance LV 6]
[Herculean Strength LV 6]	[Sturdy LV 6]	[Monk LV 1]	[Talisman LV 2]
[Acceleration LV 6]	[Overeating LV 9]	[Taboo LV 4]	

Skill Points: 29,500

Titles:

[Foul Feeder]	[Kin Eater]	[Monster Slayer]	[Poison Technique User]
[Thread User]	[Monster Slaughterer]		

>

This one's probably the strongest of the greater ones.

Sure, after seeing the arch's status, this seems like no biggie by comparison, but it's still rather strong.

Its stats are lower than the fire dragon from the Middle Stratum, but it's got way more skills.

If they fought one-on-one, the fire dragon would probably have the advantage because of spiders' fire weakness, but overall, I'd say their power's on roughly the same level.

And the other two are similar in stats, so basically, I've got four dragon-class monsters on my hands.

On top of that, they've got a ton of small taratects and some adult taratects milling around, too.

Ah, and even a few of the rare Poison variety.

Ooh, there's a few small lesser taratects, too! Now, that takes me back.

They're sooo weak.

I feel like just a light push would be enough to kill them.

Gazing off into the distance, I think about how far I've come from being one of those.

Oh, right.

Sorry, I got sidetracked for a second there, since I wasn't really expecting this big of a crowd.

But I did know this would happen.

That a bunch of taratects would come to attack me eventually.

Why?

Because I've been picking a fight with their boss.

It all started when I was fighting the fire dragon and was surprised to find myself thinking of it as "irritating."

So when all my Parallel Minds teamed up to search for the source of this oddity, that's when I found it.

Basically, I was being controlled.

To be more exact, it was more like the preliminary stages of control, or like I was unconsciously being fed thoughts that weren't my own.

Apparently, since Mother is a "queen" and all, she has a skill that lets her control her children.

And so, I started to feel the effects of that skill, if only a little.

As it turns out, she doesn't control all her children, just the ones that reach a certain level of strength. And I guess I crossed that line somewhere along the way.

I think the reasons she couldn't completely control me are my high resistance stats and the fact that my race is no longer taratect, probably.

Honestly, I would never have noticed if it weren't for the weird feeling I got while I was fighting the fire dragon, and I had no awareness that I was resisting it, so I'm not really sure why it didn't work on me.

Those are just my best guesses.

Anyway, basically, she was trying to manipulate me.

So of course I couldn't just let that slide.

That's right. I decided to launch a little counterattack.

Since Mother was trying to control me, that meant there was sort of a mental path there, connecting us ever so slightly.

So I used that path to do some reverse-engineered hacking.

I figured I'd try it with Parallel Minds, and what do you know, it worked.

So now aside from me, the main brain, the other Parallel Minds are all hard at work reverse-attacking Mother, to rave reviews.

How should I put it?

Sorta like a spirit parasite or a soul virus or something.

Well, you get the idea.

I'm basically crunching away at my mother's soul.

So obviously she's not just gonna sit there and take it.

Which means that as my Parallel Minds continue their intense mental battle against Mother, she's dispatched something like a SWAT team to take me down in the physical world.

I seem to be winning this sorta soul-ish battle against her, but if she showed up in person, I'd definitely lose.

That's why I built my home in a space between the Middle and Upper Stratum where Mother can't enter.

She's strong enough to stomp a fire dragon without even thinking about it, but because she's so huge, she can't enter such a small area.

The arch tect that's before my eyes right now is damn big, too, but apparently, it can barely squeeze through this passage somehow.

Now then, we've got a huge spider army here, with four dragon-class hotshots in the lead.

From the outside, you'd probably assume I'm in hot water.

But think about it. If I knew these guys were coming, do you really think I'd just sit here waiting without making any preparations?

These guys are spiders.

And I'm a spider, too.

These days, I tend to wander around in the labyrinth, but deep down, I'm still the type who likes to set up webs and wait for prey to get caught in them, y'know?

So of course I'm not gonna sit here and not set up any traps!

The arch tect slowly shifts into action.

I predict its movements with Foresight.

Then dodge.

The arch's fangs pass right through the spot where I was a millisecond ago.

Yikes!

So fast?!

Well, I guess this is the monster with the highest speed stat I've ever Appraised.

Plus, its Hit is maxed out, and Probability Super-Correction is at level 2.

Without my quadruple combo of Thought Acceleration, Foresight, Evasion, and Probability Correction, those fangs probably would've gone right through me.

Damn, that's scary.

But no matter how fast it might be, it's still slower than me.

Even with the arch using Magic Warfare and Mental Warfare to increase all its stats, I'm still much faster.

Plus, my Magic and Mental Warfare skill levels are higher anyway.

In fact, my Magic Warfare has even evolved into Magic Divinity.

Magic Divinity is a way more powerful version of Magic Warfare, of course.

On top of having a stronger effect than its weaker version, it even increases the rate at which magic stats go up.

Thanks to that, my already ridiculously high magic-related stats are now at truly unfathomable levels.

When I activate Magic Divinity and Dragon Power at the same time, my magic attack power and resistance easily reach the ten thousands.

Heh-heh-heh.

The arch's physical power is a threat, sure, but not if it can't even hit me.

The arch taratect makes some thread.

Oh, better not touch that stuff.

I know all about that.

Spider thread is bad news.

If you get caught, it's all over.

Well, even if I did get caught, I could use Teleport to get away if I had to, but still.

A web of thread flies toward me.

As I dodge it, I see the greater taratects starting to move out of the corner of my eye.

Ah, I guess I should probably take this more seriously.

Knowing that the traps I set up all but guarantee my victory, it's a little hard to feel any tension.

Plus, I've gotten strong enough at this point that I no longer have to worry about getting obliterated if a single attack hits me.

My raw physical stats are already high now, and I've got Magic Divinity, Mental Warfare, and Dragon Power all pushing them even higher, sooo...

If I really wanted to, I could make them even higher with Wrath, but that seems like a little much, y'know?

I mean, the Wrath skill increases my physical stats by a huge amount.

How huge, you ask? Well, at skill level 1, it already raises them just about as much as my level-9 Mental Warfare skill does.

And it doesn't even consume MP or SP.

However, when I use it, I automatically take on the status condition Madness.

Thanks to Heresy Nullification, Madness doesn't totally take over me or anything, but I still don't really want to use it ever again.

I'm plenty strong without it, and when it comes down to it, I'm a magic type anyway.

Why would I throw away my magic to get into some stupid physical fight?

Anyway, taking Perseverance into account, my real HP easily surpasses 10,000.

Nothing could possibly destroy all that with one blow, or at least,

I'd like to think so.

Anyway, this arch definitely can't.

Its strongest attack has to be Deadly Poison Attack level 10.

And it uses Utility Thread to make sure its target can't escape.

It's a vicious combo. If I didn't have Teleport, even I might be doomed if I got caught.

And I know what I'm talking about, since I've used that kind of combo plenty of times myself.

But like I said, I have Teleport, so I can get away easily enough.

Sure, physical attacks from a giant monster like that are scary, but since I've got the upper hand in speed, it's not even gonna graze me.

Other than that, the only real threat is if a big group attacks me all at once, but I've got my traps to take care of that.

Now, let's test out my new trap, "Welcome to the Sauna."

The arch is stepping into it right now.

There, the thread I set up in advance stops it in its tracks.

Heh-heh. I made the thread so thin it's practically invisible, then stuck it to the ground so you'd never notice it!

That's what I call a sticky trap!

All I had to do was guide my victim there.

But this is just the beginning.

With stats as high as the arch's, it could probably break out of the thin thread spread across the floor with sheer brute strength.

And even if it can't escape, it still has magic to make long-distance attacks.

The arch's weapon of choice is Poison Magic, one of my own favorites.

Depending on the situation, it could even become a fixed turret.

Although in my case, my poison resistance is high enough that it wouldn't do much damage anyway, so it's no big deal.

In a normal fight, yeah, a dragon-class monster is horrifying.

But this time, it messed with the wrong opponent.

After all, I know most of this thing's attack patterns already.

Think about it.

Think of all the strategies I've cultivated over time.

Setting up thread, fighting with Poison Fang, firing magic.

That's exactly what my fighting style looks like.

I'm sure this spider's no different.

We're both spider monsters, and I used to be a taratect, too.

It's only natural that our strategies would overlap.

"I already know your every move before you do it!" Like that kinda thing.

I might have even been able to win in a fair head-to-head battle.

Not that I would bother risking something that dangerous.

I brush against the arch, rendered immobile by my thread.

Then I use Dimensional Magic: Range Teleport.

This is a trap I came up with to use against Araba.

Ultimately, I decided it wouldn't work on a dragon's high resistance and Imperial Scales.

But an arch taratect doesn't have that skill.

And its resistance isn't nearly as high as my magic is powerful.

The arch is teleported along with me.

Our destination: above the magma lake in the Middle Stratum where I fought the fire wyrm.

Welcome to the hot, hot sauna.

Bwa-ha-ha-ha!

How do you like the view of the fiery red-hot magma?!

Must be awful for a spider whose weakness is fire!

Even I'm uncomfortably hot!

But this should be much worse for the arch than it is for me.

Below is the ocean of magma, so falling would undoubtedly mean certain death.

I'm small in size, so I can land on one of the little islands scattered about.

But the arch's body is around fifty feet long.

None of the rocks down there is big enough for something so huge to land on.

On top of that, this environment will drain its HP just by being here.

I spent a long time building up my Fire Resistance skill, but the arch doesn't have it at all.

Since it has HP Rapid Recovery, its HP's not really going down, but it's still gotta hurt.

So now its HP Rapid Recovery is essentially useless.

Sure, it's using Dimensional Maneuvering to support its huge body in midair, but now it has to face off with me, a highly disadvantageous opponent, in a field of flames, its biggest weakness.

Talk about a checkmate.

Heh-heh-heh. Regret your foolishness for challenging a clearly superior spider as you perish!

Now, time for the Repellent Evil Eye!

Repellent Evil Eye is the evolved form of Heavy Evil Eye. Now, instead of just dragging an opponent down, I can pull it in any direction I choose.

And not only can I pull—I can also push with it.

If I use this pushing power on the space surrounding me, I can even make a sort of barrier around myself.

Although, since the air and stuff also get pushed away from me, I

can't use it that way for very long.

Also, it may have evolved and gained more functions, but its strongest forte is still pushing downward.

So I aim that downward force at the arch and push with all my might.

As if it weren't struggling enough to keep its huge bulk in the air already, now I've added even more gravity.

You can fall if you want, okay?

C'mon, the worst that could happen is that you'll die.

Now then, hurry up and fall so you can serve as EXP for me, please.

The arch taratect somehow holds out with its Dimensional Maneuvering.

Then it makes a thread and shoots it toward the ceiling.

Really? Can't you just fall?

It's not like I'm gonna let you get away.

I use a Black Magic spell, Black Bullet.

Black Magic is the even more evolved form of Dark Magic, one step below Abyss Magic.

It's not as powerful as Abyss Magic, but it's certainly easier to use and has a simple but effective attack spell.

Namely, this one—Black Bullet.

It's the enhanced version of the Dark Magic spell Dark Bullet, and as the name implies, it fires a jet-black ball.

Along with the Dark attribute, it also seems to have the Shock attribute, so it explodes when it hits its target and does extra damage.

By the way, since it's a high-class magic, it's much more powerful than it looks.

The Black Bullet hits the arch's butt as it produces thread.

The shock sends the thread flying in the wrong direction, and the arch's HP decreases.

All right, let's wrap this up.

I fire a barrage of Black Bullets without mercy.

Will it fall into the magma first?

Or will it run out of HP first?

What's it gonna be?

The arch is doing its darndest to survive.

Oh yes, it's trying hard.

It withstands my attacks, uses Healing Magic to fix itself up, and even acquires the Dark Resistance skill.

I gotta admit, this thing has guts.

Good effort, buddy.

Now die already, will ya?

My Black Magic reaches level 3 from the constant barrage, so I use

the new spell.

This one's called Black Spear.

It's the spear version of Black Bullet, so it also causes Piercing attribute damage.

The Black Spear goes right through the battered body of the arch taratect.

Finally, the giant spider, whose stats exceed those of an earth dragon, breathes its last.

My level goes up by 4 all at once.

I peel off my molted skin.

All right, all right. Better collect the corpse before it falls.

I grab the falling arch and teleport back.

Honey, I'm home!

I'll have to enjoy this meal later.

Well, "enjoy" is probably a stretch. The body is poisonous, so it's definitely gonna taste awful.

Yep, that's right. Your captain disappeared with me and came back as a corpse.

I can understand the remaining spider troops' panicked reactions.

Okay, you there, my good pal Greater.

Sorry, I know you're busy being scared stiff right now, but would you like to go to the sauna, too?

One greater taratect, into the sauna!

From there, I simply repeat the same strategy I used on the arch.

The Middle Stratum, which once caused me so many hardships, now serves as the key to my greatest trap yet, eliminating the spider troops without mercy.

I finish off all three greater taratects with the same method, then wipe out the rest of the bunch by firing magic at random.

The stats of the adult taratects and stuff barely crack a thousand.

As I am now, they're nothing but small-fry to me.

Huh? Small lesser taratects?

They died just from the shock waves of my other attacks, so what?

The arch, the three greater, the grown taratects, and miscellaneous extras all go down before you know it.

Between the handful of bigger game and the large number of small-fry, I end up making out with a huge amount of EXP.

Thanks to that, I'm leveling up like crazy over here.

Ba-ha-ha! I can't stop chuckling.

With a nasty trick like this, I can beat all kinds of bigger game without a problem.

Well, I guess I had some extra advantages this time, but still.

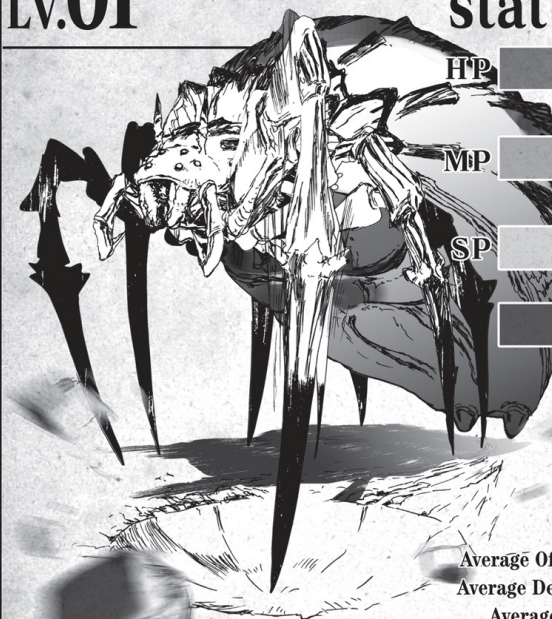
It's just like the old saying goes, really.

You can never be too prepared!

ARCH TARATECT

LV.01

status



HP 2912 / 2912

MP 2167 / 2167

SP 2898 / 2898

2901 / 2901

Average Offensive Ability : 2811

Average Defensive Ability : 2808

Average Magic Ability : 2187

Average Resistance Ability : 2199

Average Speed Ability : 2851

skill

[HP Rapid Recovery LV 1] [MP Recovery Speed LV 3] [MP Lessened Consumption LV 2] [Magic Power Perception LV 6] [Magic Power Operation LV 5] [SP Rapid Recovery LV 1] [SP Minimized Consumption LV 1] [Mental Warfare LV 5] [Threadsmanship LV 3] [Utility Thread LV 1] [Thread Control LV 5] [Cutting Thread LV 5] [Poison Synthesis LV 3] [Deadly Poison Attack LV 5] [Status Condition Enhancement LV 9] [Destruction Enhancement LV 8] [Cutting Enhancement LV 8] [Piercing Super-Enhancement LV 1] [Impact Enhancement LV 5] [Dimensional Maneuvering LV 2] [Hit LV 10] [Evasion LV 10] [Probability Correction LV 7] [Danger Perception LV 10] [Presence Perception LV 10] [Motion Perception LV 10] [Heretic Magic LV 10] [Poison Magic LV 8] [Destruction Resistance LV 6] [Cutting Resistance LV 6] [Piercing Resistance LV 8] [Impact Super-Resistance LV 1] [Shock Resistance LV 5] [Status Condition Resistance LV 9] [Rot Resistance LV 3] [Heresy Resistance LV 1] [Pain Nullification] [Pain Mitigation LV 8] [Night Vision LV 10] [Vision Expansion LV 5] [Vision Enhancement LV 10] [Telescopic Sight LV 7] [Auditory Enhancement LV 5] [Tactile Enhancement LV 4] [Longevity LV 6] [Magic Hoard LV 2] [Instant Body LV 6] [Persistence LV 6] [Herculean Strength LV 6] [Sturdy LV 6] [Monk LV 2] [Talisman LV 2] [Acceleration LV 6] [Satiation LV 1] [Taboo LV 5]

A spider monster so powerful it rivals even dragon-type monsters. Its toughness and physical strength more than match its enormous body, and it is shockingly fast despite its appearance. Clever enough to use poison and thread attacks to its full advantage, this monster has few weaknesses. According to reports, any attempt to attack an arch taratect that has built a web is essentially suicide. Danger level S.



Special Chapter

LABYRINTH

THE NIGHTMARE OF THE

What horrible timing.

That was my first impression when I was told about this job.

I had just received a letter that my child had been born, and I was looking forward to going home, when the assignment came in.

On top of not being able to be at my wife's side while she was in labor, now I won't even be able to go and see my child's face before I'm called to the line of duty.

Even though the empire is in a festive mood now that a long-awaited prince has finally been born.

The current sword-king has been blessed with few children and had half given up until he finally had a son.

The child's name, Hugo, was announced throughout the country shortly after his birth. It's easy to imagine how overjoyed the sword-king must be.

I would like to celebrate my own child's birth in a similar way, but if anything, it fills me with melancholy.

Of course, this is mainly because I cannot go and meet my child, but the nature of this mission makes my heart all the heavier.

I've been instructed to tame the mysterious monster that's appeared in the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

If I cannot, I must destroy it immediately.

Those are my instructions.

The request came from the small kingdom of Ohts, which contains an entrance to the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

This labyrinth is essentially the only means of traveling between the continents.

The exception is teleport points, but the only people who can use those are important royal figures or extremely wealthy individuals.

The kingdom of Ohts asked our empire for help because of a strange increase in the number of monsters in the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

The empire immediately sent the troops stationed nearest the

border into Ohts Kingdom.

This unit is composed chiefly of second and third sons of nobles, but they are no less powerful than any other troops.

It was assumed they would find the cause of the abnormality and quickly return home.

And that is indeed what happened.

However, it was not in the way we expected.

The troops actually fled home.

They ran from a mysterious spider-type monster.

According to the report, one look at the monster told them it could easily annihilate them all.

The cause of the so-called outbreak was that the surrounding monsters had all fled from this spider monster, driving other monsters out of their habitats.

The investigating troops reported that the monster was beyond their abilities and that a special force would have to be assembled to defeat it.

At first, this report was laughed off as utter foolishness.

However, the detailed written report and the testimony of the labyrinth guide who accompanied them confirmed the danger of this monster.

At the very least, its danger level is A.

It may even reach level S.

If such a dangerous monster was to come out of the labyrinth, the damage would be catastrophic.

But at the same time, strange rumors began to spread.

A spider monster that helps humans was spotted in the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

A local investigator immediately sought out the source of this rumor.

It turned out to be a group of adventurers who claimed they were attacked by a dangerous Elroe baladorado in the Upper Stratum, when the spider suddenly defeated it and even healed their dying party members.

What utter nonsense.

That was my thought on the matter.

As a monster tamer, I am much more informed about monsters than the average person.

Monsters have low intelligence, but they are not completely without minds of their own.

But only a legendary-class monster would have enough will and intellect to take an action like that.

If this story is true, that spider monster must be a legendary-class monster, and a considerably intelligent one at that.

There's no way I could defeat a beast like that.

However, if it actually did help people, then perhaps it is friendly toward humans.

Perhaps that means I could tame it with a little luck?

And now, my turn has come.

I really have no luck at all.

If this spider monster truly is a legendary-class monster like the rumors indicate, I doubt I stand a chance of winning.

Even if that's not the case, it's still certain to be at least an A-rank monster.

Taming a monster like that is quite difficult.

To form a contract with the Creature Training skill, one must either win the monster's acceptance or force it into the contract with brute strength.

Monsters are rarely willing to subordinate themselves, so it's usually necessary to defeat them first.

So I would have to render this A-ranked monster immobile without killing it.

In a situation where it's already difficult enough to win at all, this condition makes it all the more challenging.

Especially against a monster that's at least danger level A.

If it's any higher than that, even defeating it at all will be extremely difficult.

I needed to bring some support.

And yet.

"Harrumph. To think one such as myself should have to explore a labyrinth, at my age? How unlucky."

Next to me is the empire's most powerful mage, Master Ronandt.

He is, indeed, an incredible mage, but his personality can be rather difficult.

He can be wild and selfish, to say the least.

The man will coolly ignore orders and abuse those around him.

"Master Ronandt. If this monster is S rank or above, we will be in dire need of your power. Please try to bear with me."

"I know that. Come what may, I shall handle it with ease. Consider your safety guaranteed."

The man is generally good-humored and amusing, but the problem is that his attitude doesn't change at all even on the battlefield.

Still, there's no denying his strength.

He is known as the strongest human mage and has the power to back up that claim.

Our party for this mission is made up of myself, Master Ronandt, thirty warriors from the empire, and four guides.

I would have liked to bring the labyrinth guide who was with the previous party, but he flatly refused.

He said he had no desire to go anywhere near that thing again.

It's a shame, but there's nothing else for it.

I suppose I should be appreciative of the information that even a skilled veteran labyrinth guide was so fearful of this monster.

Not that this information is exactly reassuring.

At any rate, our first duty is to locate the monster.

"Hmm. Is this not the place where the earth wyrm's corpse was said to have been found?"

"Yes, it should be."

"Well, there is nothing here."

We've arrived in what's known as the large passage.

According to the report, this is where the monster was last encountered.

However, while we've found the nest that supposedly contained a dead wyrm, there's nothing inside.

Well...technically, I suppose there's nothing besides a few hard objects and such that might be the remains of the meal.

I look around the webs again.

Judging by the dust on the thread and the state of the inside, it seems likely that this nest is abandoned.

There are no signs it's been recently used.

"It appears to have relocated to a new nest."

"I see. Then I suppose we must comb the place thoroughly."

"Right."

We spend the next few days carefully searching the surrounding area.

However, we've still seen no signs of the monster in question.

"Still nothing."

"Strange indeed. Guides, is there anywhere in this area we have yet to explore?"

The four guides think for a while, until one finally speaks.

"There is a path nearby that leads to the Middle Stratum. Perhaps there's a chance the monster has gone there?"

"But a spider monster should be weak to fire. That's why we never considered it before."

That makes sense.

The chances are low, but it's not impossible.

The Great Elroe Labyrinth's Middle Stratum is known as a magma-filled hellscape.

Without the proper equipment, it's impossible to explore it.

And given our rations and the exhaustion of the past few days'

investigation, we should probably withdraw soon.

“All right. Then we will inspect this path to the Middle Stratum, and if there’s nothing there, we will leave the labyrinth.”

The guides lead us over to the path in question.

“What the?!”

The guide walking in the lead suddenly lets out a yell and freezes in an unnatural position.

“What happened?”

“I don’t know. What is this? I can’t move...!”

“Wait!”

Another guide starts to approach, but Master Ronandt stops him.

“Hold up your light and look carefully. It is terribly hard to see, but there’s thread across the path.”

Following Ronandt’s words, I look closely as well.

Sure enough, I can just make out thread that occasionally catches the light.

“What is that?”

“We may have found our monster.”

On closer inspection, the thread is arranged in a neat radial shape.

It’s unmistakably a spiderweb.

“Someone cut the thread and set her loose.”

One of the soldiers approaches to free the trapped guide with a sword.

However...

“Oh-ho. So it cannot be cut?”

Master Ronandt seems impressed.

The sword swung down by the soldier, much like the guide, had stopped moving as soon as it hit the thread.

The soldier tries to yank the blade back out, but it doesn’t budge.

“Guide, bear with me. This may get a little warm.”

“A-all right.”

Master Ronandt uses Fire Magic.

He operates it expertly, to burn the thread around the guide without harming her.

At least, that’s the plan.

“Hmm? It isn’t burning?”

Lesser magic or no, spider thread is supposed to be extremely flammable, yet the web remains intact.

“I shall increase the firepower, then.”

Flames surge up from Master Ronandt, wrapping around the thread.

Dazzling light fills the dark cave passage.

“Oh dear, that’s a bit too strong.”

The guide manages to escape, albeit with partially burned clothes.

The problem is that the flames have now spread along the passage.

“Now I’ve done it.”

“Agreed. If the monster is in there, it will surely be enraged.”

In that case, we can forget any hopes that it might be friendly.

Meaning that taming it would be effectively impossible.

“If we’re lucky, perhaps this web was already abandoned, too.”

“One can certainly hope. Since it has yet to appear, either it must be away at the moment, or else it has stopped using this one entirely.”

That would be good.

If the adventurers’ claims are true, this spider apparently roams freely around the labyrinth.

And supposedly, it may even use Teleport.

I’ve never heard of a monster being able to use Teleport, which only a handful of humans have mastered.

If it’s true, that means if it’s away right now, it might teleport back here at any moment.

“Everyone, be prepared for battle at a moment’s notice,” I tell the soldiers. “We must be ready for anything.”

“Oh, no need to worry so. As long as I am here, you need not fear any monster.”

Normally, Master Ronandt’s confidence would be reassuring, but in this situation, it just seems delusional.

The thread burns out, and the fire disappears.

With the fire gone, we carefully proceed down the path.

The charred remains of the thread covered a considerably long distance.

“So it’s difficult to set fire to, but once it does catch, it’s rather brittle.”

“Yes, so it would seem. The flames have apparently spread quite far.”

Continuing along the path that seems too long to be called a nest, we come to a large open area.

“What is this?”

“The entrance to the Middle Stratum,” a guide responds.

Now that I think about it, the air is rather hot.

The path we’ve been following appears to slope gradually downward.

“Hmm?”

There’s something there, farther down.

It’s hard to tell what exactly, because of the downhill slope, but there are several large somethings lying about.

“Everyone, be ready.”

The troops get into formation and cautiously approach.

I stay back with Master Ronandt and the guards, pulling out an Appraisal Stone from my breast pocket.

“Oh-ho. An Appraisal Stone, is it? And a level-8 one, at that.”

“Yes, Appraisal is indispensable for a summoner. Do you use it as well, Master Ronandt?”

“Indeed. I have the skill at level 8.”

“That’s very impressive. Since I use an Appraisal Stone frequently, I’ve garnered enough proficiency to reach level 3, but 8 is really quite something.”

“I’ve raised it in my many years of studying magic. Only at this age have I finally reached 8. Perhaps it would be more prudent to spend one’s time using Appraisal Stones than leveling up.”

“For an ordinary person, no doubt. So, what does your Appraisal tell you of that?”

I point up ahead.

At the corpse of an enormous spider monster.

“The corpse of an arch taratect, it seems.”

Arch taratect.

A legendary monster beyond S rank, just one step below the queen taratect.

Its danger level is S.

And this one has been reduced to a mangled corpse.

Not only that, but there are also three greater taratect corpses nearby.

As well as the corpses of many other taratect-type monsters, too many to count.

“And look closely. Do you see that? It looks as if it’s been partially eaten.”

I hadn’t noticed from this distance, but apparently, Master Ronandt did.

“Which means that something not only defeated an arch taratect but preyed upon it.”

A shiver runs through my body.

A creature that preys on S-rank monsters?

Could such a beast possibly exist?

If we ran into a creature like that...

...we’d be through.

Even with super-elite forces and humanity’s strongest mage, there’s no way anyone could defeat a monster like that.

We should withdraw now.

But my judgment comes a moment too late.

The nightmare incarnate teleports right in front of us.

The spider monster appears before the corpse of the arch taratect.

Compared with the huge arch taratect, it’s rather small.

Its entire body is black, except for a white pattern on its back.

Terrifyingly, the pattern looks just like a skull.

Of its eight legs, the two in the front are bigger than the others and taper off into the shape of scythes.

And its eight red eyes are glaring right at us.

My body instinctively cowers away at the sight.

I can see the men in front shaking in their boots in spite of their orders to be “ready for anything.”

But I can’t blame them.

How could anyone help trembling when a thing like that suddenly appears before them?

The monster looks like a monarch, ruling over everything around it.

Just a glimpse of it is enough to set you trembling.

It’s just like the reports said.

Even without Appraising it, I could tell in an instant.

That’s not the kind of monster the likes of us can do anything about.

“O...oooogh hh?”

Hearing a strange moan, I turn to my right to see Master Ronandt staring at the monster with wide eyes and trembling intensely.

So even he’s fallen victim to the fear this monster brings?

The terror that creature inflicts on us isn’t just due to its appearance.

It must have an Intimidation-related skill, but I’m still shocked even someone as powerful as Master Ronandt wouldn’t be able to resist it.

“Master Ronandt?”

“How... How can this be? Such power, such power... Impossible. What is this creature?”

“Master Ronandt!”

“...Yes, yes. I apologize.”

“What’s happened to you?”

“That monster...it seems relaxed, yet it has a truly immense amount of skills activated all at once. Impossible...”

Master Ronandt must be able to see the monster’s active skills in a way I cannot.

From the way he’s muttering to himself, he doesn’t seem to be in his right mind.

It doesn’t appear to be an effect of the Fear condition, but it still does not bode well.

Because the spider monster, which seemed calm enough at first, is starting to look angry.

This is bad. It’s getting ready for a fight.

And the soldiers, sensing that anger, automatically ready their weapons.

It's no use. At this point, I don't see any hope of befriending this creature.

Suddenly, a strange sense of discomfort overwhelms me.

Is this...Appraisal?

But who?

Could that monster be Appraising us?!

How is that possible?!

I have never heard of a monster that can use Appraisal.

To confirm, I use my own Appraisal Stone.

But the results of the Appraisal astound me.

Absurdly high stats.

A vast number of skills.

We don't stand a chance of defeating something like this.

"What?!" Master Ronandt shouts.

Apparently, he activated Appraisal at the same time I did.

His mouth hangs open in shock.

"H-Height of Occultism?!"

Master Ronandt seems to be particularly taken aback by one of the skills held by the monster, the "Ede Saine."

Personally, I've never seen or heard of that skill.

But that isn't all.

The Ede Saine has multiple skills I've never seen before.

In addition, there are several I am familiar with that are very high-ranking.

And that still isn't the end of my shock.

It happens as I'm partway through looking at the skill list.

Suddenly, the Appraisal results disappear, replaced by the phrase <Appraisal Blocked>.

Appraisal...blocked?

I've never heard of such a thing.

"W-wait! Show me more, more!"

"Master Ronandt!" I exclaim urgently. "Please, come back to your senses!"

The mage seems to have gone mad.

At the same time, I shout to the men.

"Retreat! We can't beat this thing! Retreat at once!"

But the cry comes too late.

The eight soldiers at the head of the group collapse.

I don't know what happened to them.

The Ede Saine didn't seem to be doing anything.

It was just standing there, staring at us.

And yet, that was enough to cause eight men to fall without a

moment's notice.

What sort of skill is this?

Since I wasn't able to look at all of the creature's skills, I have no idea what's causing it.

But either way, the monster isn't stopping there.

The Ede Saine begins to do something strange.

It's like it's peeling off its own skin.

This bizarre sight terrifies the soldiers.

One of the soldiers, overcome with fear at seeing his comrades fall, charges at the Ede Saine.

But his sword never reaches the creature, instead breaking on a wall of earth that rises from the ground.

Wait. From what I saw of the skill list, the monster didn't seem to have Earth Magic.

There was a kind I'd never heard of, Abyss Magic, but I believe I saw all of its other magic skills.

And Earth Magic definitely wasn't among them.

"What?!" Ronandt bellows. "It created magic from scratch without using a skill?!"

I can't believe my ears.

Is that really possible?

Even the strongest human mage alive is clearly disturbed.

No, this can't be something normally possible.

This is no time to be stingy with my skills.

I have to bring out all my trump cards if I have any hope of surviving.

Even then, I'll consider myself lucky if I make it through.

Summoning. My Summoning skill is at level 4.

In other words, I can summon a total of four monsters to this place.

My best hope is to use the monsters to buy time for the soldiers to escape.

But how long can I hold off a beast like that?

My summoned monsters appear.

Kirekock, a bird monster.

Rock Turtle, a tortoise monster.

Feveroot, a tiger monster.

Suiten, a water wyrm.

All of them powerful monsters, which I would never normally use lightly.

I'm sorry, all of you. Go!

As I order my summoned monsters to attack, I once again shout at the soldiers to withdraw.

Kirekock's Wind Magic lands a direct hit on the Ede Saine.

This surprises me at first, but when the dust kicked up by the magic attack clears, I understand why.

The Ede Saine is unharmed.

For that monster, Kirekock's magic wasn't even worth dodging.

Still, it bought us some time.

Thanks to Kirekock's leading attack, the slow-footed Rock Turtle has reached the front lines.

Rock Turtle's high defense is its selling point.

With the shield in place, the other three monsters commence their attacks.

Kirekock's Wind Magic swoops down from the sky, while Suiten's Water Breath brings a burst of scalding steam.

Feveroot attacks directly after the first two shots land.

Its excellent speed and high attack power are on display as it jumps at the Ede Saine.

An earthen spear rises out of the ground to meet it.

Unable to react in time to its sudden appearance, Feveroot is impaled by the spear.

Immediately after that, Kirekock falls out of the air.

As quickly as if something had struck it down.

It crashes violently into the ground, emitting an unpleasant sound as it sinks in.

What's going on?

Just like that, Kirekock is crushed by an invisible force.

Meanwhile, Suiten continues to unleash Water Breath.

But the Ede Saine seems utterly unconcerned.

It slowly turns toward Suiten and fires a Wind Magic spell.

First Earth, and now Wind?!

As I look on in shock, the Wind Magic blows away the breath attack and Suiten along with it.

Only Rock Turtle remains.

But it isn't moving. It can't.

Appraising it to determine the cause of its strange behavior, I discover it now has the Paralysis status condition.

Not only that, but all of its stats are rapidly decreasing.

Its HP, too. In just a few short moments, the tenacious Rock Turtle is reduced to a husk.

My summoned beasts, who have overcome so many trials with me, have all been slaughtered.

And yet, it is not sadness nor anger that rules my mind right now.

It's fear. Shameful, and inexcusable toward the poor beasts that died for me.

But even knowing that, I can't seem to resist the fear that wells up from deep within me.

I want to run away from this place right now.

However, as the leader of the force, I cannot flee before my subordinates can get away.

My soldiers started to evacuate in the short time the summoned monsters bought for them at the cost of their lives.

But not quickly enough.

They've struck Master Ronandt over the head to bring him back to his senses, and he's begun preparing large-scale teleport magic to evacuate the troops.

Still, it will be a little longer before all the troops fall back into the range of the Teleport spell.

Just a few short seconds remain. But in those seconds, a nightmare unfolds.

Earth and Wind Magic fly about wildly.

They seem to be shooting off at random, yet each shot takes another soldier's life.

Other soldiers suddenly collapse without being hit at all.

It's the same mystery attack that took down Rock Turtle.

An attack that was able to drain even Rock Turtle's high HP in an instant.

Unable to withstand it for even that long, the soldiers collapse one after another.

Magic flies toward Master Ronandt as he prepares the teleport magic.

Knowing that my MP will soon run out, I summon more monsters to shield Master Ronandt.

The magic attacks come again and again.

Each time, I summon another monster.

I drink an MP recovery potion, then another.

I summon as I drink. My MP gradually recovers.

However, the amount consumed is higher than the amount recovered.

A spell, a summon, a spell, a summon.

After countless repetitions, I finally run out of beasts to summon.

And yet, the magic attacks don't stop.

On the contrary, there are clearly even more than before.

As I look around for answers, I find that Ronandt and I are the only two left alive.

"Master Ronandt."

"We have no choice. I will at least bring the two of us back alive."

Ronandt tries to activate the Teleport spell, but the Ede Saine appears directly before him.

"Master Ronandt!"

"Eh?!"

A jet-black spear shoots toward him.

It's full of a horrifying amount of magic power, making those Earth and Wind spells look like child's play.

And it's headed straight for Master Ronandt.

Ronandt is too focused on constructing his own spell to avoid it.

And I've used up all my summons, so I have nothing left to use as a shield.

The rest happens in the blink of an eye.

I use my own body to block the dark spear.

My body seems to burst open.

The black spear pierces right through me to attack Master Ronandt behind me.

Master Ronandt's right arm and part of his flank are blown away.

Throwing myself in its path must have altered its trajectory just a little.

Master Ronandt looks anguished as he activates the Teleport spell.

The world around me warps. I close my eyes instinctively, and when I open them, we're not inside the labyrinth anymore.

"Huh?"

People gather around us in shock.

"Someone, bring healing items or magic," Master Ronandt commands, his face twisted with pain.

This must be the empire's magic research lab, then. Immediately, there's a clamor all around us.

"You must hold on a bit longer."

Master Ronandt uses Recovery Magic on me.

"Nearly half your upper body's been destroyed. I'm amazed you're alive."

"Guh..."

I try to say something, but all that comes out of my mouth is blood.

My body slowly begins to recover.

My HP creeps out of the red as well.

As Master Ronandt ignores his own wounds to heal me, other healers rush over to treat him.

I breathe a single sigh, completely exhausted.

There were a great deal of sacrifices, but we survived.

"What good is it being the 'strongest human mage'? I couldn't do anything, not a thing..."

As my consciousness fades, Ronandt's bitter voice echoes unpleasantly in my ears.



I STILL DON'T KNOW THE STUPID NICKNAME OF “NIGHTMARE OF THE LABYRINTH” THAT I GOT THAT DAY

I'm currently conspiring to defeat Araba to rave reviews.

Today, I've returned to the place where I first encountered Araba, the bottom of the huge pit with bees buzzing around.

To do what, you ask? Why, to exterminate the bees, of course.

See, I've been thinking. If I set foot on the ground to fight Araba, I don't stand a chance.

This isn't a complicated metaphor or anything. I literally mean that if I touch the ground while fighting Araba, I'm going to lose.

Because the ground is one of Araba's weapons.

Can you imagine earth spears and junk suddenly popping out of the ground underneath you?

Not only that, but it can also block attacks using walls of earth and stuff like that.

So I decided I wouldn't feel safe unless I stay off the ground.

I know, I know, what are you gonna do then? Well, I'll just stay in the air! Duh.

Lucky for me, I have the Dimensional Maneuvering skill, which lets me run around freely in the air.

With this skill, I can hold up a respectable air battle even without wings.

And what better place to engage in that sort of battle than in the center of a spacious area where I can keep my distance from the walls?

This pit is wide enough that I can keep a decent amount of space between the walls and me, effectively negating the threat of Araba's Earth Magic.

It's the perfect place for our fated battle.

However, there's just one little problem.

Yep, you guessed it: those stupid buzzing bees.

The last thing I need is for these idiots to try to interfere while I'm

focused on my battle with Araba.

So, with the double purpose of eliminating a nuisance and earning EXP, let's start exterminating some bees!

JAB!

Uh, ow?!

I've been stabbed?!

In the back, I've been stabbed in the back?!

Excuse me, the starting bell didn't ring yet, asshole!

Ow, ow! Thanks to Pain Mitigation, it actually doesn't hurt *that* much, but it's bringing back some real traumatic memories of the time I got stabbed like this before and almost died!

I tie up the bee on my back with thread and yank it off.

Ugh. What a pain.

Now you've gone and done it, pal.

Who would've thought a stupid bee would pull off a surprise attack on me, even with my Detection skill?

Although that being said, my HP barely went down, and it's already healed back up with Auto-Recovery.

Pretty crazy that this almost killed me before, huh?

It opened up a nice big air hole in my back, and since I didn't have HP Auto-Recovery back then, my only chance at survival was leveling up and molting. That brings me back...

JAB!

Again? Seriously?!

Since I have Pain Super-Mitigation, too, now, it hardly hurts at all, but that doesn't make it any less annoying!

It's a pain to keep throwing them around, so I just use Thread Control to slice it up this time.

Man, but if it happened twice, it's totally gonna happen a third time, huh?

How are they even getting to my back without setting off my Danger Perception anyway?

Oh, maybe because they're not actually registering as dangerous?

I guess it's not technically doing any real damage, so I'd be hard-pressed to call it "danger."

Ah, in that case, maybe the bees aren't even registering as enemies to me anymore?

I mean, they really are just fodder to me now, so I guess that's not wrong...

JAB!

Cut it out already!

Seriously, this is kinda weird, right?

How can they sneak up on me so easily without even having Stealth or anything?

Sure, I might be kind of an idiot, but this is still weird.

Come to think of it, aren't bees the natural enemies of spiders or whatever?

Is there some kind of hidden advantage outside of the regular system at work here?

No, that can't be... Right?

Anyway, damage or no, it's still pissing me off.

Sure, I'll admit it takes some guts to come at me like that in the face of my Intimidation-plus-Fearbringer combo, but still, this is on them.

So let's get on with the extermination!

I hop through the air with Dimensional Maneuvering.

I fire magic at every bee in sight and use my scythes to slice up any that get too close.

Wow. I used to need a whole web setup to take these guys on, but now I'm taking them down like nothing.

Bwa-ha-ha-ha! Behold! These bees are like garbage before me!

Oh? I haven't seen this kind of bee before.

According to Appraisal, it's called a general finjicote.

Oh-ho-ho. This must be the next rank above the captain bees.

Looks about as strong as a snake, maybe?

Well, it's no match for me as I am now.

Thinking back, when I first fell into this hole, most of my stats were barely halfway into the double digits.

If this guy had shown up back then, I might've been in trouble, even with a home base set up.

But tough luck for you, pal! I've advanced light-years beyond the weakling I was before!

Specifically, my stats are about a hundred times stronger!

Seriously, just looking at my stats alone, it's crazy how much stronger I've gotten.

If you take my skills into account, too, it might even be more than a hundred times.

Pretty impressive growth rate, if I do say so myself!

So, I'm sorry to ruin your dramatic entrance and all, but I'm gonna have to shut you down right there, Mr. General.

Oh, wait, here's another one.

I guess I must be getting close to the hive now, huh?

I do see some kinda object up above me.

Actually, it's more of a building than an object, huh?

I guess that makes sense, since the bees that live in it are almost ten feet long.

It's waaay huge.

I wonder if there's a queen bee-type of figure in there...

Well, I'm gonna knock down the whole damn nest anyway, so it doesn't really matter.

Do your thing, Black Magic!

The beehive collapses, taking the surrounding bees with it.

As it goes down, I mercilessly rain more magic on it for good measure.

Boy, am I good or what?!

Now, all this destruction might draw Araba's attention, so I better get outta here.

I'm not ready to fight it just yet.

I return home from the pit with Teleport.

And when I arrive, I find a bunch of humans milling around.

Excuse me?

Uh, where did all these guys come from?

Don't tell me they knew I was going to teleport here and were lying in wait?!

No, apparently not.

They're all totally freaking out now, after all.

Man, what's the deal here?

Oh, they're dressed sorta like those knight dudes I saw before, so these must be their friends or something.

Are they all knights from a certain country or something?

Huh?

Wait, how did they even get all the way here?

Didn't I set things up so they'd have to get through my webs to reach this point?

When I dealt with the spider army, I took down my thread to lure them inside, but I know I put them back up after that.

Wait a sec.

I'm getting a bad feeling about this.

Activate Clairvoyance.

My home is... Aaaaah?!

It...it...it's BURNED?!

Oh boy. Ohhhh boy.

It's gone.

The home I worked so hard to build.

It's been reduced to ashes.

I don't believe it.

Even with Flame Resistance added to the thread, I guess it's still weak to fire.

Damn it! These guys have a lot of nerve to do this to me!

I flash back to when I was still weak, when my home was burned down for the first time.

All the frustration comes rushing back.

At the time, I was weak.

My beloved home was taken from me, and I could only run away.

But things are different now.

I've gained enough strength to protect my pride.

And while I was out, these guys trampled all over it.

It'd be harder NOT to get angry in this situation, right?

Plus, after burning down my home and trespassing inside, now these guys are trying to oppose me.

The knights have drawn their swords, holding them out toward me.

Back in Japan, this would definitely constitute legitimate self-defense, right?

I could totally say these guys tried to attack me, and I just did what I had to do, right?

There is a total of thirty-four of them.

Their stats are higher than the knights I saw before, too.

On average, they're around 400.

Some of the higher ones even go past 500.

And there are two individuals who are way stronger.

At a glance, I'd say one's a warrior type and one's a mage type.

Oh, but the warrior guy has the Summoning skill, huh?

It's an advanced form of the Creature Training skill that makes monsters obey you.

The user can summon trained monsters from a long distance and even use Teleport to a limited extent.

He's got Cooperation and Command and stuff, too, so he might be more of a monster tamer or a summoner than a warrior.

The mage-type guy is definitely a mage, though.

His skills and stats both totally scream, "I'm a wizard!"

However, his stats are much higher than the other humans', and he's got a pretty expansive skill set.

He kinda looks like he's teetering on the verge between middle and old age, but I guess he might actually be pretty strong after all...

Hmm? What's this unpleasant feeling?

Just as a strange sensation washes over me, I notice something in my status.

"Appraisal in Progress"?

The message suddenly appears above my stats.

Looking at it, even my skills are flashing red.

Ah, does this mean they're being Appraised?

So the strange feeling I've been getting is what being Appraised feels like?

Wow, gross.

Quit peeping, you perv.

If the flashing red text indicates what's being Appraised, the perpetrator must be pretty high level.

Hmph. Activate ruler's authority. Appraisal rejected.

<Use of ruler's authority confirmed. Blocking effects of [Appraisal] skill.>

I didn't expect to have to use my ruler's authority like this.

Since it uses my divinity field, I prefer to avoid it as much as possible, but I don't like the idea of someone else looking at my status.

Destruction of property, trespassing, and now peeping, too.

How much more do you have to keep rubbing me the wrong way before you're satisfied?

For now, I'm gonna lock and load Cursed Evil Eye in all eight eyes.

And activate it starting...now.

As soon as I turn it on, people start dying.

...I know that sounds hard to believe, but trust me, I don't know what happened, either.

They weren't just a little bit weak or fragile.

All it took was a single glance.

I mean, hang on a sec. How are you guys this weak?

Huh? For real?

I, uh... Hmm.

It's just, you know, um.

I didn't actually mean to kill anyone, okay?

Even I have a little scrap of a conscience, you know.

Huh? Wait, or do I?

Hmm. Come to think of it, I do understand morals and all, but even in my old life, I obeyed the law only because it seemed like breaking it would be a pain.

I knew the rules, and I followed them because it didn't seem worth the trouble to do otherwise, but I guess it's not like I was doing it because of my own conscience or anything.

Oh, also, it looks like I leveled up from that. Twice, in fact.

Really? These weaklings give out that much experience?

I accidentally killed eight people just now, but each one of them gave out more experience than a greater taratect.

Um, wow.

They do have a stupid number of skills, so I figured they'd maybe give more EXP than their weak stats might indicate, but I didn't think it'd be THIS much.

Oh man. Humans' experience value is way too tempting.

And since I already killed a few, I'm kinda starting to feel like a

few more wouldn't be that big of a deal.

They attacked me first...and it's not like I was really that worried about it in the first place...and I *am* a monster, after all.

What's the big deal if I murder them?

Look, my biggest goal in life is to live with pride.

Anyone who stomps all over that pride and tries to threaten my life is an enemy who needs to be soundly defeated.

In this world, even my own parents and siblings are my enemies, so it doesn't make any practical sense to hold off on killing humans simply because I used to be one.

Plus, the humans are the ones who started being hostile in the first place.

I'm just trying to live my life, and they come in here and burn my home.

If they're going to threaten my life and step on my pride, then human beings are my enemy.

So I might as well just throw away any stupid sense of morality from my old life.

First, let's get out of the skin I just molted.

If you think about it, doesn't that make this kind of like a strip show?

Yeah, right.

Ah, while I was distracted by that stupid thought, another idiot came charging toward me.

I could just finish 'em off in the usual way, but maybe I'll use these guys as guinea pigs for a little experiment instead.

I start constructing magic.

The magic I saw when Araba fought the giant snake a while back.

I rely on my memory to re-create the spell.

Then I activate the completed magic.

The Terrain Magic spell Terrain Wall.

Even without the skill, I can still invoke the spell if I know how, huh?

It's just that having the skill means the system will assist you, so it's a lot harder without it.

If I had to compare it to something, I'd say it's like walking instead of taking a train.

If you're walking, you reach your destination of your own accord by checking the way as you go, while taking a train gets you there automatically.

Obviously, if you had to say which one's easier, it'd be the train.

But it's not impossible to get there by walking.

Getting a magic skill means automatically attaining the ability to construct that magic.

Then you just have to create the construction you've already got.

In other words, if you know the construction, you can do the same thing by hand.

At least, that was my thought process. Turns out it really works.

Maybe this is thanks to Height of Occultism?

Mr. Knight gets carried into the air by the wall that appears below his feet.

Wow. He ended up in the kinda state you can't really describe out loud. Rest in pieces, buddy.

Now that I've crossed the line once, I don't really think anything of killing people, huh?

Kinda makes me the worst type of person, if I'm being honest.

But I'm not a person anymore, so it doesn't really matter.

The summoner guy is shouting now.

Oh? Looks like he's summoning something.

A bird, a turtle, a tiger, and a dragon?

Whoa. It's probably just a coincidence, but this is a really Four Gods-esque lineup.

Though I gotta say, if that is the intention, it's pretty far off base.

The bird's black, for one thing, and the turtle kinda just looks like a big rock. Plus, the tiger is highlighter pink for some weird reason, and the "dragon" is just a water wyrm that looks more like a puffer fish than anything.

Talk about a bunch of knockoffs.

I guess they are kinda strong, though.

Based on stats alone, they're stronger than the guy who summoned them, even.

The higher stats among them are over 800.

They have way less skills than the humans, though.

The bird starts using Wind Magic.

Whoa, it can use magic?

Maybe being tamed by a human means it gets a little smarter?

I don't have the resistance skill for wind, and it probably won't do much damage, so maybe I should let it hit me so I can pick up the resistance...

Ouchie. That hurt a little.

I guess just one hit isn't enough to get a resistance skill, huh?

Now Wind and Water attacks are flying at me at the same time.

I don't have Water Resistance, either, so I'll let that hit me, too.

Oh, here comes the tiger.

Letting this guy hit me won't give me any skills, so he's useless to me.

I use the Terrain Spear spell I saw Araba use.

Huh? What?

I'm using Terrain Magic, but the skill I got is its lesser form, Earth Magic.

Oh, so I guess using Terrain Magic still just accumulates Earth Magic proficiency?

Hmm. The fact that re-creating magic I haven't acquired from scratch earns proficiency is a useful discovery, but I guess the skill you get from it is the lowest magic from that system.

Well, whatever.

Being able to get a magic skill without using skill points is still a big plus.

Having the skill certainly makes construction easier, and it'll be stronger and more precise too.

Ooh, in that case, I should copy the bird's Wind Magic, too.

I've seen it a few times now, so I get the basic idea.

If I learn to use Wind Magic, I don't need to bother with getting the resistance right now.

Which means you've outlived your usefulness, my feathered friend.

I knock it down with Repellent Evil Eye.

Then I test out the Wind Magic on the puffer fish.

Ooh, it worked.

If I keep using it, I can probably get the skill in no time.

So the rock turtle there is all that's left, right?

Its defense power certainly is high, but compared with the earth dragon's...

It has stupidly high SP, too, so I start stealing it away with Jinx Evil Eye.

Thanks for the snack, guy.

While I was busy with the four gods (LOL), the knights have started trying to escape.

I'm not letting you get away, my precious EXP.

I use mostly Earth and Wind Magic to take them down, earning proficiency while I'm at it.

At the same time, I use my Evil Eyes to reduce their numbers.

Hmm? Is the mage trying to teleport or what?

And isn't that the advanced spell Large-Scale Teleport?

Trying to escape with the whole group, huh?

Out of range of my Evil Eyes, huh?

Guess I'll snipe ya with magic, then, huh?

Oh, the summoner's blocking my shots.

Well, aren't you special?

The summoner desperately summons one monster after another to block my magic.

Then he drinks something, and his MP starts slowly recovering.

Is that an MP recovery potion, then?

I didn't know such a handy item existed.

Boy, human beings sure play dirty.

I finished off all the knights, but these two might actually escape.

Maybe instead of wasting my time with sniping, I should take 'em out with one big shot.

I break into a run. At this distance, a quick dash is faster than teleporting.

I stop right in front of the summoner and the mage.

Activate Black Spear.

This isn't just proficiency grinding like I was doing before.

I'm using the highest-level magic available to me right now.

First, I'll finish off the mage with this.

Then I can take care of the summoner at my leisure.

Oh wait, the summoner's using his own body to protect the mage.

The black spear pierces through the summoner and injures the mage, but they barely manage to escape with Teleport.

Aw, man.

They got away.

Well, no big deal.

I marked them already, so I can take care of them whenever I feel like it.

Plus, aside from the two who escaped with Teleport, it looks like four people managed to escape on foot.

If they're running away, that must mean they're heading for the exit.

If I let these guys go, they'll head straight to the labyrinth's exit, won't they?

Well then, I'll just let them lead me right to freedom.

It'll probably take a few days to get there, but it's still faster than just wandering around at random on my own.

It's been a long time coming, but now I know where the exit of the labyrinth is.

Which means I can finally get out.

Though honestly, after this little encounter, I think it might be impossible for me to have peaceful contact with humans after all.

Still, this time was only because these guys rubbed me the wrong way. It's not like I'm gonna go around killing people indiscriminately.

Even if they do give me lots of delicious EXP.

If they don't start anything with me, I won't do anything to them.

If you attack me, I'll attack back, but if you treat me with respect, I'll do the same for you.

I don't know how likely I am to get any respect from humans, but

let's not worry about that.

Either way, nothing's gonna happen if I don't at least try going outside.

But before I go out, there's something I have to do.

Now that I've leveled up a bunch, it's the perfect time to take on the challenge.

To challenge my trauma, earth dragon Araba.



TO THE HOME OF THE ELVES

It's been a few days since we rescued Leston and the others.

After the rescue, they all woke up without a problem, but we're having them rest just to be safe.

I may have resurrected them, but the truth is that they were absolutely dead for a short time.

There's no telling what sort of side effects there might be.

Still, maybe thanks to the fact that they're taking it easy, there haven't been any signs of trouble yet.

In the meantime, I finally removed Anna's brainwashing.

It had been slow going before we rescued everyone, but over the past few days, it finally started to work quickly.

Now, if I Appraise her, I don't see any status conditions.

As soon as the brainwashing started to come undone, she completely returned to her senses.

Even the strongest brainwashing seems to fall apart as soon as the victim starts to suspect that something is wrong.

However, with the brainwashing solved, another problem has emerged.

"I've wronged you so horribly, Master Schlain..."

Now Anna is deeply depressed.

Just like with Katia, she still has all her memories of the time she was brainwashed.

Even knowing she was forced to do it, she nevertheless harbors feelings of guilt over the things she did under Hugo's control, and she spends all her time brooding about it.

There's not really anything I can do about that.

I can only assure her that it was Hugo's fault for brainwashing her and that Anna has nothing to feel guilty about.

It's the truth, but saying it only seems to make her feel even guiltier, so she's stuck in a vicious circle of depression.

All I can do now is watch over her and hope she'll recover on her own.

Ms. Oka also finally woke up.

And at the same time, we received information that Hugo has

dispatched an army to the forest where the elves live.

All of us are now meeting up in the conference room of the mansion.

We have to have a serious talk about what we're going to do next.

"Now, let's discuss our plans from here on out."

Katia's father, the duke, is in charge of the proceedings.

"Firstly, regarding the current state of the kingdom, the queen seems to have taken control of the administration. Cylis is officially stated to be bedridden with illness, which is why he hasn't made an appearance. Most likely, he has yet to recover from the state you all witnessed him in."

It's possible Cylis would go back to normal if the brainwashing were removed.

But considering it took almost half a month to cure Anna of her brainwashing, I'm sure it would take them even longer to remove it.

Even if they could, I don't know if Cylis would ever recover from the broken state Hugo's extreme brainwashing reduced him to.

"The queen's future plans are unknown, but it has apparently been decided that Sue will be marrying Prince Hugo of the empire. I am certain the empire will use this as a foothold to essentially rule our kingdom."

That's right. Hugo brainwashed Sue and has taken her away to the empire.

As his fiancée, no less.

"Starting with Leston, just about everyone here is a fugitive of the law. However, not all the nobles in the kingdom have fallen into the hands of Hugo or the queen. We must begin to secretly gather allies and take action toward eventually restoring the kingdom."

Only some particularly influential nobles have been brainwashed by Hugo.

He left others alone, like certain neighboring lords who nonetheless have power in the kingdom and nobility in the capital without much influence.

Apparently, the duke, Leston, and others intend to persuade these nobles to help slowly regain their status.

"But that still doesn't address the root of the problem."

Leston looks at me as he speaks.

"Now that Hugo has taken control of even the Church, it's safe to say his aim is to conquer the entire world. However, we cannot overlook that even as he attempts to throw humanity into chaos, we are in the midst of a war against the demons. Our own kingdom is important, of course, but if we leave humanity to take care of itself, it could easily create an opening for the demons to take over."

My brother Julius lost his life in that battle.

If Hugo throws the whole world into chaos, Julius's sacrifice could end up being in vain.

That's one thing I refuse to allow.

More than anything, there's no way I can ever forgive Hugo for everything he's already done.

"Shun. As the true hero, will you step forward to defeat Prince Hugo, enemy of our kingdom and all humanity?"

Most likely, Leston is speaking not only for himself but for everyone here.

I feel the same way as all of them.

I have no reason to refuse.

"Of course."

After the meeting, Katia, Hyrince, Ms. Oka, Anna, and I all gather in a different room.

The five of us, together with Fei, are going to head to the elves' village to stop Hugo.

Apparently, Hugo himself is heading up the invasion.

With the help of Ms. Oka's connections, we'll meet with the elves and strike back against Hugo's imperial army.

Since there are few soldiers in the kingdom who can currently be deployed, and we don't know who might be in the hands of Hugo or the queen, we decided to go in the form of a small, elite unit instead.

Fei, Hyrince, and I were all a given, as well as Ms. Oka as our intermediary with the elves, but there was a bit of a quarrel over Katia and Anna coming along.

Katia is the duke's daughter.

Her father was against sending her into danger, and he demanded that she stay.

Katia flat-out refused, and a parent-child quarrel broke out.

It took all day, but Katia finally talked her parents into allowing it, so now she's coming with us.

"I ended up telling them I was going even if I had to use force, so that finally shut them up."

So the duke didn't actually agree, but he knew he couldn't stop his daughter if she got serious.

My condolences, Duke and Duchess.

Your daughter has grown into a terrible delinquent who won't listen to her parents.

As for Anna, she ended up facing down all our protests.

She says she wants to come to atone for her sins.

To be honest, I can't say I'm in favor of her coming with us.

Anna is strong enough to have served as my and Sue's maid-slash-

bodyguard, but she's still not on the same level as the other members of the group.

On top of that, Anna is a half elf.

Elves are deeply prejudiced against any mingling of their bloodline with other races.

They hold no fondness toward any such child.

Anna was born in the elf village and cast out.

I don't know the details of that past, but it's obvious she doesn't have good memories of the elves.

And yet, we're about to bring her back to that same place.

I don't think any good can come of that.

Still, leaving her behind would be worrisome in its own right.

Since recovering from her brainwashing, Anna has been emotionally unstable.

She's spent a lot of time brooding, the crimes she committed while brainwashed weighing heavily on her.

To the point where I'm worried it might become permanent psychological damage if left alone.

So, I am hopeful that bringing her outside will have a positive effect on that mood.

And since I'll be worried about her either way, I decided it'd be better if I can at least keep an eye on her, so we agreed to take her with us.

With our members thus decided, the next question is how we'll get to the elf village.

Unlike our kingdom, which is on the continent of Daztrudia, the village is on the continent of Kasanagara.

And there are only two ways to cross between those continents.

One is to use a teleport point, like the one that was in the castle.

However, most teleport points are similarly located in places like the royal castles of various kingdoms.

The only people who can use them are royalty, high-ranking nobles, and the like.

We might meet that condition normally, but right now, we're on the most-wanted list.

It's doubtful anyone would let us use a teleport point.

The only possibility I can think of is the kingdom my older sister, whom I've never met, married into, but unfortunately, that kingdom is quite far away.

Which leaves us with only one choice.

To pass through the largest labyrinth in the world, the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

You might think we could just cross the ocean, but that's not an option.

The ocean is the domain of an enormous water dragon that will sink any ship attempting to cross it.

It might be possible to go by way of the sky, but even Fei would have difficulty with such a long-distance flight between continents.

Because of all this, despite the immense danger of the Great Elroe Labyrinth, people still come and go through it quite frequently.

Incidentally, there was the question of whether Fei's large body would fit inside the labyrinth, but she's assured us it won't be a problem.

"The real issue is whether we'll make it in time once we get through the labyrinth."

"Not to worry. Once we reach the other continent, the elves have a hidden teleport point we can use. By my calculation, we should be able to get to the elves' village before the imperial army attacks."

With that, Ms. Oka has solved the last of our problems.

Now we just have to make sure we reach the elf village safely.

"Before we leave, there's something I must talk to all of you about."

Our teacher's expression is grave.

True enough, I do still have a lot of questions for her.

About Sophia, about Hugo, about what the elves have been doing...

But her next words stop all my questions in their tracks.

"Before I tell you everything, let me say this. This world was created as part of a game among gods."



SISTER

THE RULER AND THE YOUNGER

“How do you do, Little Sister?”

“What do you want?”

“I just came to see how you’re doing, of course.”

“Well, you’ve seen me, then. Please leave.”

“Oh, don’t be so cold. Couldn’t we talk a little first?”

“I have nothing to say to you.”

“Is that so? And here I thought you would need comfort, sobbing away about pretending to be brainwashed so you could betray your beloved older brother.”

“Hmph! That’s none of your concern. You’re just a god’s hunting dog!”

“Oh? Aren’t you in the same boat now? That’s why you betrayed your brother, I believe.”

“That’s not true! I haven’t betrayed him!”

“But you are obeying our master. That makes you an enemy of the human race, my dear.”

“Ngh!”

“Ah, there it is. That face. That’s what I wanted to see.”

“You’re horrible.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment, thank you.”



SPIDER VS EARTH DRAGON ARABA

I've made up my mind to challenge Araba.
Now I'll just check my status one last time.

<Ede Saine

LV 26

Nameless

Status: 1,032 (blue) (+1,700 details) (blue)

SP: 2413 (red) (+1,700 details)

Average Offensive Ability: 2,302 (details)

Average Magical Ability: 1,150 (details)

Average Speed Ability: 7,440 (details)

Skills:

[HP Rapid Recovery LV 7]	[Height of Occultism LV 1]	[SP Rapid Recovery LV 1]	[SP Minimized Consumption LV 1]
[Destruction Enhancement LV 6]	[Cutting Enhancement LV 8]	[Status Condition Super Enhancement LV 1]	[Magic Divinity LV 2]
[Magic Power Conferment LV 7]	[Mental Warfare LV 9]	[Energy Conferment LV 5]	[Dragon Power LV 7]
[Deadly Poison Attack LV 6]	[Rot Attack LV 4]	[Heretic Attack LV 6]	[Poison Synthesis LV 10]
[Medicine Synthesis LV 7]	[Threadsmanship LV 8]	[Utility Thread LV 6]	[Thread Control LV 10]
[Telekinesis LV 1]	[Throw LV 10]	[Expel LV 2]	[Dimensional Maneuvering LV 8]
[Stealth LV 2]	[Camouflage LV 1]	[Silence LV 8]	[Tyrant LV 1]
[Concentration LV 10]	[Thought Acceleration LV 9]	[Foresight LV 9]	[Parallel Minds LV 7]
[High-Speed Processing LV 6]	[Hit LV 10]	[Evasion LV 10]	[Probability Correction LV 7]
[Wind Magic LV 4]	[Earth Magic LV 10]	[Terrain Magic LV 1]	[Heretic Magic LV 10]
[Shadow Magic LV 10]	[Dark Magic LV 10]	[Black Magic LV 2]	[Poison Magic LV 10]
[Healing Magic LV 10]	[Spatial Magic LV 10]	[Dimensional Magic LV 4]	[Abyss Magic LV 10]
[Destruction Resistance LV 5]	[Impact Resistance LV 5]	[Cutting Resistance LV 5]	[Flame Resistance LV 2]
[Wind Resistance LV 2]	[Earth Resistance LV 8]	[Heavy Super-Resistance LV 1]	[Deadly Poison Resistance LV 3]
[Paralysis Resistance LV 6]	[Petrification Resistance LV 5]	[Exhaustion Nullification]	[Acid Resistance LV 6]
[Rot Resistance LV 7]	[Faint Resistance LV 5]	[Fear Resistance LV 9]	[Heresy Nullification]
[Pain Nullification]	[Pain Super-Mitigation LV 2]	[Five Senses Super-Enhancement LV 1]	[Perception Expansion LV 5]
[Night Vision LV 10]	[Clairvoyance LV 8]	[Jinx Evil Eye LV 6]	[Inert Evil Eye LV 5]
[Repellent Evil Eye LV 1]	[Annihilating Evil Eye]	[Celestial Power]	[Ultimate Life LV 3]

1]	LV 3]		
[Instant Body LV 7]	[Endurance LV 7]	[Fortitude LV 2]	[Stronghold LV 2]
[Skanda LV 7]	[Demon Lord LV 3]	[Perseverance]	[Pride]
[Wrath LV 2]	[Satiation LV 7]	[Sloth]	[Wisdom]
[Conviction]	[Hades]	[Corruption]	[Taboo LV 10]
[Divinity Expansion LV [n% I = W]			

6]

Skill Points: 0

Titles:

[Foul Feeder]	[Kin Eater]	[Assassin]	[Monster Slayer]
[Poison Technique User]	[Thread User]	[Merciless]	[Monster Slaughterer]
[Ruler of Pride]	[Ruler of Perseverance]	[Ruler of Wisdom]	[Wyrmslayer]
[Fearbringer]	[Dragon Slayer]	[Ruler of Sloth]	[Monster Calamity]

>

That's a whole lot of growth, but my magic-related stats are especially crazy.

They've broken into six digits now.

Height of Occultism is terrifying.

To be honest, though, I'm still not positive I can break through the earth dragon's staggering magic defense.

The spider army was a good matchup for me, but with those scales that obstruct magic, dragons are a really bad one.

But with these insanely high stats, I'm sure I can at least do some damage if I just keep casting magic.

On the defensive front, I've been smacking myself around with Earth Magic to acquire and improve my Earth Resistance.

I mean, my defense is so low that it kinda feels like trying to put out a wildfire with a water gun, but it's got to be better than nothing.

Then there's my new Sloth skill.

As you can probably guess, it's another one of the Seven Deadly Sin skills, like Pride.

This skill is gonna be my trump card in my battle against Araba.

Pride is a support skill that's pretty much useless in battle, and Perseverance is a defensive skill.

By the same token, the Height of Occultism skill I got with Wisdom is helpful for attacking, but Wisdom itself is still a support skill.

Out of all the broken, OP skills I've gotten, I think Sloth is the first one that's a proper attack skill.

With this broken skill, I can penetrate Araba's defenses.

In fact, without it, I don't think I could challenge it at all.

I spent quite a lot of time in the Lower Stratum raising my level, but even among all those powerful enemies, the strength of earth dragons is still a cut above.

And among those earth dragons, Araba is the strongest by a long shot.

I don't think I'd stand a chance without all the preparations I've made.

Now I'm waiting in the pit.

All my senses are focused on awaiting its arrival.

My Danger Perception activates.

All the hair on my body bristles.

I remember this feeling.

I could never forget it.

I don't think I ever will.

The first real terror I experienced after being reborn as a spider.

The symbol of the first time I became truly aware of death.

Slowly, I turn around.

<Earth dragon Araba LV 32

Status 5/4,673 (blue)

SP: 44,569/44,569 (red)

Average **Defensive Ability**: 4,597 (details)

Average **Magic Ability**: 4,023 (details)

Average **Speed Ability**: 4,555 (details)

Skills:

[Earth Dragon LV 3]	[Divine Scales LV 2]	[Heavy Armor LV 1]	[Ultra Steel Body LV 1]
[HP Rapid Recovery LV 8]	[MP Rapid Recovery LV 5]	[MP Minimized Consumption LV 5]	[Magic Power Perception LV 10]
[Precise Magic Power Operation LV 1]	[SP Rapid Recovery LV 7]	[SP Minimized Consumption LV 7]	[Magic Warfare LV 9]
[Magic Power Super-Attack LV 1]	[Mental Divinity LV 1]	[Energy Super-Attack LV 3]	[Terrain Attack LV 10]
[Terrain Enhancement LV 10]	[Destruction Super-Enhancement LV 3]	[Cutting Super-Enhancement LV 10]	[Piercing Super-Enhancement LV 8]
[Impact Super-Enhancement LV 10]	[Dimensional Maneuvering LV 8]	[Stealth LV 10]	[Camouflage LV 3]
[Hit LV 10]	[Evasion LV 10]	[Probability Super-Correction LV 4]	[Danger Perception LV 10]
[Presence Perception LV 10]	[Heat Perception LV 10]	[Motion Perception LV 10]	[Earth Magic LV 10]
[Terrain Magic LV 10]	[Seismic Magic LV 2]	[Shadow Magic LV 10]	[Dark Magic LV 7]
[Destruction Super-Resistance LV 1]	[Cutting Super-Resistance LV 4]	[Piercing Super-Resistance LV 3]	[Impact Super-Resistance LV 5]
[Shock Super-Resistance LV 1]	[Terrain Nullification]	[Fire Resistance LV 6]	[Lightning Resistance LV 8]
[Water Resistance LV 5]	[Wind Resistance LV 6]	[Dark Resistance LV 4]	[Status Condition Super-Resistance LV 7]
[Rot Resistance LV 6]	[Pain Nullification]	[Pain Super-Mitigation LV 7]	[Vision Enhancement LV 10]
[Telescopic Sight LV 8]	[Night Vision LV 10]	[Vision Expansion LV 7]	[Auditory Enhancement LV 10]
[Auditory Expansion LV 3]	[Olfactory Enhancement LV 7]	[Tactile Enhancement LV 7]	[Ultimate Life LV 3]
[Ultimate Magic LV 1]	[Ultimate Movement LV 3]	[Fortune LV 3]	[Fortitude LV 3]
[Stronghold LV 3]	[Deva LV 1]	[Sanctum LV 2]	[Skanda LV 3]

Skill Points: 41,100

Titles:

[Monster Slayer]
[Champion]

[Monster Slaughterer] [Dragon]
[Monster Calamity]

[Assassin]

>

The dragon appears.

It's as majestic and imposing as ever.

My trauma.

Crazy.

Those stats are seriously crazy.

It's got all the strengths of Kagna and Gehre, and then some.

This dragon seriously has no weaknesses.

More defense power and defensive skills than Kagna.

More speed and speed skills than Gehre.

And on top of that, higher magic ability than Kagna or Gehre could ever dream of.

Worst of all, it's even mastered Dark Magic, one of my chief attack methods.

Its Dark Resistance is really not a good sign.

Araba's a perfect all-rounder.

Flawless attack, flawless defense.

No weaknesses to take advantage of, no weak points to aim for.

You could basically call it the ultimate life-form.

Ha-ha. Honestly, at this point, I just have to laugh.

Ahhh, what a relief.

The fear I felt that time was real.

The fear I felt that time was right.

Earth dragon Araba, you're strong.

Scary.

And yet, I'm happy.

Ahhh, so happy.

I've grown strong enough to fight an opponent I could only hide away from in terror before.

With perception skills like that, you must have noticed I was still alive back then, right?

You noticed, but you overlooked it because I was too small and insignificant to bother about, didn't you?

I'm going to make you regret that arrogance.

Thank you.

You taught me the fear of death.

That's why I am the way I am now.

I ran away from you, ran and ran and ran, and now here I am.

So thank you.

And now, die.

You're the irritating being who gave me my first taste of the fear

of death.

Now I'm going to bury you myself.

By doing so, I will overcome my fear.

I'm not going to flee from you anymore.

My long life of running away ends right here and now.

I open with a Black Spear.

Araba avoids it with ease.

Then it counters with a breath attack.

I avoid it with ease.

Each of us understood that the other would dodge the attack.

It's like we were testing each other's feelings.

The events unfold as if we had arranged them beforehand, like lovers who have been separated for a long, long time.

Not that I would know, since I've never even had friends, never mind lovers.

After we exchange these initial attacks like greetings, the real battle begins.

Just as I planned in advance, I use Dimensional Maneuvering to rush up into the empty air of the pit.

That way, I can keep away from the ground and render Araba's Earth Magic useless.

Araba does have Dark Magic, too, so it's not like it can't use magic at all now, but this gets rid of its home-field advantage for a fair fight.

Araba seems to understand this and kicks off the ground to follow me.

As I hop through the air, I shoot Black Bullets at Araba.

Paying no mind to how much MP I'm using, I fire away like a machine gun.

And yet, like an expert player of bullet hell games, Araba easily dodges around the hail of projectiles mid-approach.

Thanks to Divine Scales, a high-class version of Imperial Scales, the power of my magic is drastically reduced.

Still, with my six-digit magic attack power, it should at least deal a little damage.

If it hits anyway.

Araba has exceptionally high evasive power.

I don't just mean skills. There's also the dodging techniques Araba has honed over countless years of battle.

Its movements are honestly elegant.

I was confident in my evasive abilities, too, before, but seeing Araba's with my own eyes, I realize my evasion just depends on the brute strength of my skills and stats.

After all the tough fights I've been through, I was starting to think

of myself as a super-experienced fighter, but I guess my movements are still ultimately those of an amateur.

I mean, I definitely don't have any martial arts knowledge or anything.

In terms of pure stats, my speed is much higher, but Araba closes that gap with actual technical ability.

If my magic lands a hit, I'm sure it'll do some damage, but chances are Araba will recover from it before I can land another one.

And since I'm not using Parallel Minds right now, fighting and firing magic at the same time is pretty tough.

My Parallel Minds are currently engaged in a critically acclaimed mental battle with my mother.

If I could engage them, I could probably use a barrage of magic too big for Araba to avoid or recover from and bulldoze my way through for the win.

But I can't do that now, so there's no point in thinking about it.

I have no such ace in the hole.

So there's only one tactic I can take right now.

I have to make Araba think I'm worth fighting at full strength.

If Araba goes all out in this battle, my shot at victory will come into view.

Because as soon as that happens, my second, invisible form of poison will start to eat away at Araba's body.

Araba prepares an attack.

My Foresight skill tells me it's about to use Breath.

The same attack that once destroyed my home.

Araba's breath attack flies at me.

I use Short-Range Teleport.

Landing directly on Araba's head.

As the defenseless head continues to emit the breath attack, I fire a Black Bullet at it.

It lands a direct hit, forcing Araba's mouth to close.

The mouth that's still producing Breath.

With nowhere else to go, the breath attack explodes in Araba's own mouth.

Apparently, a dragon's breath attack isn't just the Attack attribute of that dragon.

Because although Araba has Terrain Nullification, its HP decreases.

Combined with Black Bullet, I did a pretty decent amount of damage.

Short-Range Teleport takes a few seconds from preparation to invocation, so I can't just use it constantly, but if I prepare it in advance like this, I can pull off a decent surprise attack.

Although I'm sure Araba will be on guard about it from now on, so it won't go quite this easily.

Even as the mouth explodes, the tail attacks me like it has a mind of its own.

This tail is going to be a real pain.

I avoid it as it lashes out like a whip.

The powerful whooshing noise it makes as it flies just past my face makes me shiver.

Considering my HP and MP, I don't think I would die from a single hit.

Still, it's so powerful that I can't help picturing myself being sliced in half by that awful tail.

Following the tail, a front paw comes swinging at me, so I jump back.

Putting some distance between us, I fire a Black Spear as a feint.

Araba stops for a moment to avoid running into it.

Araba's HP recovers at a rapid rate.

So fast.

Just as I thought, defeating it by whittling down its HP would be next to impossible.

As I sigh inwardly, several black balls appear around Araba.

Is this the Dark Magic spell Dark Bullet, maybe?

Spurred on by Araba's will, the Dark Bullets come flying at me.

I could dodge them, but then I'd make an opening for Araba, who's speeding toward me along with the spells.

Time to fight darkness with darkness!

I activate the same spell, canceling out the approaching Dark Bullets with my own.

At the same time, I avoid Araba's gnashing fangs and fire a Dark Bullet as a counterattack.

However, Araba's paw knocks the bullet away, and the tip of its tail whips toward me at the same time.

Giving up on attacking for now, I focus all my power on dodging.

I flee even higher into the air.

Close combat is definitely not ideal for me here.

Araba has all kinds of attack methods—fangs, claws, that tail, and even a body slam with that enormous body could be dangerous if Araba felt like using it.

It's like its whole body is weaponized.

We're nowhere near the ground, and that last round proved that Araba's Dark Magic is no big threat, so my best bet is probably to keep as much distance between us as possible and engage in a long-range battle.

Just as that thought crosses my mind, Araba's mouth creaks open.

Then, with almost no charge time at all, it fires a No Motion Breath.

Wha—?!

I didn't know you had that move!

I invoke Repellent Evil Eye and generate a repellent force all around myself.

The pseudophysical barrier it forms protects me as I hurriedly dodge to the side.

Araba's breath passes by narrowly, practically grazing me.

No, not practically. It did graze me!

That was close! Too close!

Because it wasn't charged up at all, it wasn't very powerful, but a direct hit would probably still do some damage.

Damn. I might not really have the advantage in a long-range fight, either.

Since Breath is some kinda pure energy, not really physical, I guess my pseudobarrier won't really work to fend it off.

Dammit, my Evil Eyes are practically useless here!

I've been using all my Evil Eyes on Araba since the battle began, of course.

But none of them seems to be working very well.

It's not that there's no effect whatsoever, but it's not enough to be significant.

I can barely tell if Jinx Evil Eye has lowered Araba's stats by even 1 percent, and judging by Araba's movements, I doubt Repellent Evil Eye's gravity attack is causing it any trouble.

Inert Evil Eye?

That one's probably least effective of all, isn't it?

I definitely can't picture Araba being paralyzed.

I do have Annihilating Evil Eye, which I haven't tried yet, but I don't really want to use it, since it seems more like a last resort kind of move.

I automatically acquired the skill when I evolved into an Ede Saine, but as you might guess, it's an Evil Eye that carries the Death attribute.

Right, the Rot attribute, which controls death.

Rot attacks tend to be suicide-bombing techniques, and this one's no exception.

When I activate it in one eye, that eye becomes useless.

Not only that, but it even gives me a nasty headache.

It's super-strong, of course, so I'm sure it could damage even Araba, but I don't know if it'd be enough to make it worth it.

Not to mention, the damage it'd cause my much lower HP would be relatively big.

If I've got the enemy down to the point where using it would finish them off, I could get away with using it then, but otherwise I'll be the one in a pinch if I use it.

By nature, Evil Eye attacks can't be dodged as long as the target is in my line of sight, but that doesn't matter if they don't work properly.

Ugh, my attacks don't hit, and even when they do, they hardly do anything!

Seriously, I knew this, but what an aggravating enemy.

Fleeing farther upward, I keep firing magic.

Araba chases after me, fighting back with Breath.

I keep going farther up, but Araba stops abruptly.

Damn! It noticed the spiderweb I set up in advance.

Once I decided to make this pit the site of my showdown with Araba, I set up one or two traps for good measure.

But it saw right through them.

Just above the spot where Araba stopped, a network of my thread blocks off the vertical shaft.

With a hole just big enough for me to pass through, of course.

I fire magic at Araba, careful not to hit the thread.

Araba dodges the attacks, moving left and right without coming any higher.

I was hoping Araba would get caught in my web so I could fire a load of magic at the dragon while it was stuck, but this is still hindering Araba, so I guess that works, too.

Undaunted, Araba fires back with Breath.

Our firefight of Breath and magic continues through the barrier of the web.

Araba avoids my magic.

Then a waterfall of poison rains down on the dragon.

I made it by using Poison Synthesis at its max production amount, multiple times in a row.

The rain of deadly and paralyzing poison is blown away by a single blast of Breath.

The drops of poison scatter harmlessly.

I didn't really have high hopes that it'd do damage, but blowing it all away that easily? No waaay.

Araba keeps shooting more breath attacks up toward me.

The repeated barrage is starting to create a hole in my web.

I avoid the antiaircraft fire with the help of Dimensional Maneuvering.

In the process, I use Utility Thread to make a net and shoot it at the hole with my Expel skill.

Heh-heh-heh. That's right—I finally got the Expel skill I've always wanted!

Or rather, it emerged from Throw once I maxed that out.

Well...it does use MP, and it's too low-level to be very fast, so honestly, just using the regular Throw skill would probably have been better. But it's the thought that counts.

I clumped the net into a ball before Expelling it, but then I use Thread Control to spread it back out into net form right before Araba's eyes.

The dragon dodges the net with almost exaggerated caution.

That's totally the right way to react, though.

Even Araba won't have an easy time of escaping if it gets caught in my web.

But if the dragon's going to be that wary of my thread, that's actually a good thing for me.

I start spraying thread down from the sky.

Araba recoils from it, dodging or destroying the thread with Breath.

Then, at last, a hole large enough for Araba to pass through opens in the web.

Araba promptly comes up toward me with Dimensional Maneuvering.

Come on in, pal!

At first glance, it might seem like I was scattering the thread at random, but they're all connected with thread so thin, it's practically invisible to the naked eye.

And I'm holding the thread that's the source of it all right here.

I use Thread Control to reel in a bunch of the thread at once.

At the same time, I fire Black Bullets toward Araba.

Spider thread coming up from behind.

Black Bullets approaching from the front.

If the dragon dodges the Black Bullets, it'll get caught in the thread.

But if it doesn't dodge the Black Bullets, it'll take damage.

So, Araba, which will you choose?!

Araba chooses.

But it's not either of those options.

Araba uses Breath to eliminate the Black Bullets.

Then, ignoring the aftermath, the dragon charges right toward me.

Shit!

I barely manage to avoid a fang attack.

It grazes me slightly, decreasing my Satiation stock of HP.

That was close.

I almost failed to avoid it because I was holding this thread.

Naturally, pulling on all that thread limits my movements.

Araba's actions just now were a little unexpected.

I was sure that either the thread or the Black Bullets would work.

I guess I've still been underestimating Araba.

Okay, gotta focus.

Araba and I both still have energy to spare.

The battle is far from over.

Both of us are fighting ferociously.

However, the stalemate continues.

I have high enough evasion power to dodge Araba's attacks, and even if I get hit once in a while, I recover quickly.

Araba is so focused on catching up to my speedy evasion that it can barely attack.

It's not that neither of us has any way of winning.

My winning move is my thread.

If I catch the dragon in my thread, even Araba will need some time to escape.

If I fire magic at it for all I'm worth in that time, I can win.

But so far, Araba has been very cautious of my thread.

Apparently, the dragon knows as well as I do that it's the one thing to avoid.

So Araba's been responding carefully to any attacks involving thread as it chases me.

With that perfect guarding stance, I can't seem to hit Araba with my thread.

On the other hand, Araba's winning move would be its max-power breath attack.

If Araba uses all its power, its breath attack would be even more powerful than the time that it destroyed my home in a single blow.

A hit from that would be enough to turn even me into dust.

Even with Perseverance invoked, if I get hit with that once, I'll keep getting roasted until I completely run out of strength.

But Araba isn't firing that.

Since it takes so long to charge Breath to its maximum power, it creates a huge opening, making it that much easier to dodge and counterattack.

That's why Araba's using only single-shot Breaths without charging them up.

A single-shot Breath is no slouch, either.

But it's inevitably got a shorter range and less power.

I've been able to dodge all of them so far, and even if it hits me, it'd be far from a fatal injury.

So even though we both have moves that would clinch our victory, we're not actually able to use them.

So naturally, the battle's getting dragged out.

We exchange feints with the occasional serious attack, carefully avoiding letting the other take charge, keeping our eyes out for an opening.

As it stands, I'm at a slight disadvantage.

My attacks don't work at all.

They do hit on rare occasions.

But even then, they don't leave any lasting damage.

Any damage they cause is healed almost immediately.

Even if I hit a few times in a row, Araba withdraws for a moment or even attacks to stop me from firing, buying it enough time to recover from my attacks.

As a result, despite how long and hard we've been fighting, Araba's damage is still at 0.

On the contrary, its resistance has actually increased.

Araba's Dark Resistance, which started out at 4, is now at 5.

At this rate, the already small amount of damage I'm dealing will get even smaller.

On the other hand, if any of Araba's attacks hit me, I'll be in trouble.

A single blow isn't enough to deplete all my HP and MP, of course.

But Araba's attacks are definitely powerful.

If I get hit with a single attack, it'll easily send my small body flying.

As soon as that happens, there's a good chance it'll create an opening for Araba to attack even more.

If that happens, I'll be toast.

The difference in our chances is too large.

I specialize in evasion, but if I mess up even once, it could easily end up in victory for the dragon.

I have no intention of going down so easily, of course.

But the scary thing is that it's not entirely impossible.

On top of that, this situation can't go on indefinitely.

After all, this pit isn't endless.

I keep fleeing higher and higher.

Naturally, that means I'm getting closer to the ceiling.

Once I reach the ceiling, I'll have nowhere left to run.

Not to mention that the ceiling is also made of earth.

Anywhere there's dirt means we're in Araba's domain.

So not only will I be out of places to run, Araba will have the home-field advantage again.

I've put up a few webs in the pit, but that's only stalling for time.

At this rate, I'll eventually hit the ceiling.

So on top of being at a slight disadvantage already, I'm gradually

being driven into a corner.

Naturally, this fact is drastically increasing my tension.

Sharpening my senses.

I focus on the images Foresight projects for me.

In the slow-motion world of Thought Acceleration, I heighten all my senses, taking care not to miss even the smallest piece of information.

<Proficiency has reached the required level. Skill [Thought Acceleration LV 9] has become [Thought Acceleration LV 10].>

<Condition satisfied. Skill [Thought Acceleration LV 10] has evolved into skill [Thought Hyper-Acceleration LV 1].>

<Proficiency has reached the required level. Skill [Foresight LV 9] has become [Foresight LV 10].>

<Condition satisfied. Skill [Foresight LV 10] has evolved into skill [Future Sight LV 1].>

At this exact moment, my skills evolve.

Perfect timing.

The already-slow-motion movement of the world gets even slower.

The sporadic images Foresight showed me become constantly visible.

I can see it. Araba's next move.

And now, with Thought Hyper-Acceleration, I can see what's coming after that unfolding in slow-motion.

Like a game of chess.

The flowing combo attack of claws, fangs, and tail, which I'm sure Araba intended as a killing move, is easy to dodge for me now.

Damn, I'm good.

If Araba wants to land an attack on me now, it'll have to move at a speed beyond my perception, right?

This is good.

That's it. Go ahead and come at me. I don't feel like anything could hit me now.

Dodge. Dodge. Dodge.

Evade. Evade. Evade.

And as I go, I keep firing counterattacks.

Before, the dragon had a slight upper hand in evasion, but now the scales are tipped in my favor.

Even though Araba was able to dodge my attacks with its expert techniques before, now that my skills have evolved, I can see right through its movements.

I already had the overwhelming advantage in speed.

Araba's ability to make up for that by dodging my attacks with sheer ability was, in a word, incredible, but now that I have skills that give me an additional advantage, the dragon can't handle it so easily.

Araba's HP slowly begins to go down.

Sensing the increase in my evasion and hit rate, Araba is starting to get desperate.

With Thought Hyper-Acceleration, even that emotion is an opportunity for me.

And I'm not lenient enough to let a mental gap like that slide.

Heretic Magic spell: Phantom Pain.

Araba reacts with visible surprise.

That's only natural.

With Araba's high level of Pain Super-Mitigation, the dragon probably hasn't experienced intense pain like this in a long time.

And the illusion of pain created by Heretic Magic can't be relieved by a Pain Mitigation skill.

I know that for a fact, since I experienced it myself with the pain Detection caused me.

Well? How do you like your first taste of pain in who knows how long?

Araba grits its teeth and withstands the pain.

Heretic Magic is fairly easy to resist if you set your mind to it.

A monster like Araba with immense mental power should be able to shake off the effects of the magic after a moment.

But a moment is all I need.

The second Araba is distracted by the pain, I cover its body in thread.

As the dragon tries to writhe free, I keep wrapping it up.

Bound by countless layers of thread, Araba's body finally stays still.

I don't want to let it fall back to the ground, so I stick the thread to the wall, suspending Araba in midair.

I've done it!

Now all I have to do is mow Araba down with magic before it can escape!

But Araba's next action totally crushes my expectations of victory.

Come on, now.

That definitely can't be right.

I mean, it did occur to me I might not be able to beat Araba just by catching it in my thread.

It might figure a way out, like using Breath on itself or something.

A full-powered breath attack would be too much for even my thread to withstand.

If the dragon did that, I'm sure it'd damage itself, too, but since Araba has Terrain Nullification, I'm sure it wouldn't be enough to fatally wound itself.

That's probably a much more realistic means of escaping than just

letting me fire magic at Araba to my heart's content.

And if I can come up with that plan, it wouldn't be that surprising if Araba actually did it.

But what Araba does is far beyond anything I anticipated.

In fact, it catches me totally off guard.

In the worst possible way, too.

See, you get skill points when you level up.

But apparently, there are other ways to get them, too.

Looking at the skill points of, say, an arch taratect, which should be roughly on par with my own species, I clearly have way less.

The difference in our stats can be explained away by the difference in how long we've lived.

Even without leveling up, your stats go up gradually just by going about day-to-day life.

Unlike wild monsters, I've been actively working on leveling up, which is why I've grown rapidly in a short amount of time.

That's why my stats outside my level haven't gone up as much.

But I don't think other monsters go out of their way to fight other than when hunting food.

So they level up more slowly.

I don't know how long that arch had lived, but judging by the difference in our stats, I'm guessing it was a fairly long time.

Other than magic and speed, the arch's stats were more than 2,000 points higher than mine.

Even if you assume stats go up one point a day, that means it's lived more than two thousand days longer than me, or six years.

And I don't think stats go up once a day at all, so it's entirely possible it lived much longer.

Which means if you live for a long time, maybe you get a certain amount of skill points, too?

Otherwise, I have no idea why there would be such a large difference in our skill points.

Unless there's some other condition for acquiring skill points that I don't know about.

Anyway, what I'm trying to say is this: Since earth dragon Araba has probably been alive for a ridiculously long amount of time, it has a ridiculous number of skill points.

Like most of the monsters I've seen, Araba has probably never once used those points.

I don't see any skills that look like they were acquired with skill points, and most of all, Araba's got that massive stockpile of points just sitting around, so I think that's a safe assumption.

Seems like a waste to me, but it's not like I can tell other monsters to use their points, and their not acquiring extra skills works out in my

favor, so I never really worried about it.

But now...Araba's skill points have decreased.

Not just a little, either. Araba has used practically all of them.

The 41,100 points the dragon started out with have dwindled to a mere 100.

And seeing what skills were acquired makes my breath catch.

[Fire Magic LV 10] [Flame Magic LV 10] [Inferno Magic LV 1]
[Flame Enhancement LV 1] [Flame Resistance LV 1] [Black Resistance LV 1] [Space Perception].

My weakness is fire, and Inferno Magic is the highest form of Fire Magic there is.

Then there's Flame Enhancement, the advanced version of Fire Enhancement.

In order to avoid being hurt by its own magic, Araba has improved the Fire Resistance it already had by acquiring Flame Resistance.

Black Resistance to counteract my main weapon, Black Magic.

Space Perception is probably to deal with my teleportation.

All these skills have been chosen specifically with me in mind.

Araba acquired them for the sole purpose of defeating me.

After spending such a long time piling up these skill points, the dragon used them all on me.

And on top of the ones acquired with points, there are the skills Araba's gained in the process of our fight to the death.

[Concentration LV 1] [Prediction LV 1] [Parallel Thinking LV 1]
[Arithmetic Processing LV 1] [Heresy Resistance LV 1]

Araba must have been thinking very intently about how to get out of this crisis alive.

Of course, there's no way those skills will evolve all the way up to my golden combo of Thought Acceleration and Foresight over the course of this battle, but that doesn't change the fact that Araba just became a lot more dangerous.

With the addition of Heresy Resistance, too, it might be safer to assume Heretic Magic won't work at all now.

Rend Soul might be different, but I don't think I dare to use that.

This is bad. I mean really bad.

Up until now, I've faced enemies with an advantage over me several times.

But I've never had one come up with a countermeasure specifically for me.

Araba was already a strong opponent with various advantages.

And now that opponent has taken countermeasures against me.

The thread binding Araba burns away.

Inferno Magic level 1, Scorched Earth.

It's a wide-range spell that covers the ground in flames, transforming it into a hellscape.

Since it's been activated in midair, Araba's body is being treated as the ground instead, flames surging across it.

In the center of those flames, Araba isn't exactly unharmed.

Unlike a nullification skill, resistance doesn't mean you won't take any damage.

Even if it's from your own spell.

Flame Resistance is the evolved form of Fire Resistance.

It's impressive to have gained such an advanced skill so quickly, but that's still not enough to reduce the damage to zero.

Now, Araba is literally on fire as it seeks a chance to attack me.

Thanks to its Rapid Recovery skill, its HP isn't going down very quickly.

But still, its body is slowly being burned by the flames.

Maybe if I keep running away, Araba will eventually just destroy itself?

Nope. I know it's not gonna be that easy.

The fire disappears. That's inevitable, since Araba probably canceled the spell.

Araba's HP starts to rapidly recover.

Over the course of our fierce battle, the dragon's HP Rapid Recovery skill has leveled up, too.

Now its HP's getting restored so quickly, it makes you wonder if Healing Magic is involved.

Ugh. Growing in the middle of a battle like this? Who do you think you are, the protagonist?

Only the protagonist is allowed to have such a cool moment of development like that, you know.

No fair! This is totally cheating. Seriously, gimme a break.

Araba puts one foot on the wall.

A moment later, the wall is burning up.

Flames spread across the walls of the pit at a frightening rate.

It's like the entire hole is on fire.

Araba runs along the burning wall.

Rapidly arriving at a spot diagonal to where I am in the air, the dragon charges right at me.

Bringing the blazing wall along with it.

A chunk of the blazing wall detaches from the surface.

Excuse me! Why would you cause a natural disaster like that so casually?!

I escape upward, but below me, Araba's created a bridge of burning earth.

I guess since Araba can make spears of earth, it's only natural it

can increase the scale of that to make a bridge...?

Yeah, right!

Seriously, what the hell?!

Araba runs around the walls, building one bridge after another.

As if closing off my escape routes.

Burning earth is starting to fill the air.

The structure is almost like a spiderweb.

I never thought an enemy would use my own strategies against me.

Araba sprints at a high speed across the countless burning bridges.

Despite the extra weight I've been inflicting on the dragon with Repellent Evil Eye, it doesn't seem to be moving a single bit slower.

Araba runs across the bridges and leaps into the air. Claws at the ready.

There's nowhere I can go below me. My only choice is to flee higher.

Araba soundlessly lands on another bridge and starts to charge again.

It jumps at me from another spot. I dodge.



It lands and, with some MP recovered, starts increasing the number of bridges again.

The flaming earth seems to chase me higher and higher.

The heat from the flames alone threatens to decrease my HP.

Then those flames start to attack me as if they have a will of their own.

Araba's fire magic lights up the air as if to close off any chance of escaping.

You're supposed to be an earth dragon!

How come you can use fire even better than a fire dragon, huh?!

Without any space to fight back, I run around fleeing from the pursuing fire.

A bit of flame brushes my body, and I catch fire.

I immediately produce medicinal water with Medicine Synthesis, putting out the flames.

At the same time, the medicine recovers some of my HP.

That's right—I don't have to douse myself in poison and cause damage to my own HP anymore!

Plus, even after reaching the Upper Stratum, I've been practically bathing in magma to increase my fire resistance!

I'm still weaker to it than any other attribute, but still!

Oh, the ceiling.

I've finally reached the ceiling, the literal end of the road.

Araba's flames are covering the ceiling now, too.

I've got nowhere left to run.

I glance at Araba's stats.

Not yet. It's still not quite there yet.

I'll have to face off with Araba in this cage of burning earth.

Araba starts to attack.

Gathering my resolve, I avoid Araba's attack and land on a bridge.

With nowhere else to run, this is my only option.

In the next moment, Araba brings a breath attack down on me and the bridge alike.

I dodge it.

Behind me, I hear the sound of the bridge collapsing.

But I have no time to worry about that.

Flames burn my body mercilessly.

Even with Rapid Recovery, my HP is going down at a pretty fast rate.

I want to put it out immediately, but Araba refuses to give me a chance to do so.

Avoiding the dragon's attack, I start Medicine Synthesis, but Araba bears down with another attack right away.

As if our positions have now been reversed, I half jump, half fall down between the bridges, with Araba chasing close behind.

I plunge my way through the burning earth, the fire scorching my body.

While I dodge Araba's attacks desperately, I resign myself to being hit by the rest of the flames.

I activate Medicine Synthesis to try to heal my wounds and put out the flames, but the fire immediately spreads across my body as if mocking my efforts.

Crap. I'm freaking out.

I can't focus enough to use Teleport in these circumstances.

This is bad. My HP's going down.

My Satiation stock runs out.

But Araba's attacks still don't let up.

My HP reaches 0.

Perseverance activates.

My MP starts to decrease little by little.

Thanks to the combination of HP Rapid Recovery and the MP recovery effect granted by Height of Occultism, the damage I take is reduced somewhat while Perseverance is in effect.

Still, my MP's definitely going down.

Oh crap, oh crap, oh crap, oh craaaap!

But just in the nick of time, it's working!

Araba's movements rapidly deteriorate.

The strengthening skill it was using comes undone.

Its momentum from moments ago is totally gone now, its movements slowing to a stop.

The poison I've been preparing all this time has finally put Araba's life in checkmate.

The poison known as Sloth.

<Sloth: n% of the power to reach godhood. Drastically multiplies the amount of decrease in surrounding system numerical values, excluding the user's. In addition, the user will gain the ability to surpass the W system and interfere with the MA field.>

In other words, the decrease of HP, MP, and SP have increased for every living thing in the area except for me.

HP and MP have automatic recovery.

But there's no such thing for SP.

The more Araba fought against me, the more it used up its strength and the faster its SP decreased.

Since fighting in midair requires constant use of Dimensional Maneuvering, and having Mental Divinity active continuously consumes SP, it was easy to make Araba fall victim to Sloth.

And without Appraisal, Araba had no way of noticing.

Only when it's gone so far that the body begins consuming itself has the dragon finally recognized its own starvation.

Araba has almost no SP left now.

The battle is over.

I destroy the burning bridges around me with Black Bullets.

Then, keeping away from the flames surrounding me, I activate Medicine Synthesis to put out the flames on my body.

Araba can't move anymore.

It has no strength left to move.

Its HP hasn't changed yet, but if it runs out of SP, its HP will run out, too.

And now, if the dragon moves even a tiny bit, it'll use up the last of its SP.

At this point, I can basically do whatever I want to Araba.

Heh-heh-heh. It was a lot harder than I was expecting, but it still ended just the way I planned for.

I knew from the beginning that it would be impossible to reduce Araba's HP to 0.

Dragons' magic-canceling scale skills are extremely inconvenient for me.

And if I tried to physically attack Araba, I feel like I'd just hurt myself more.

Araba's defense power is far, far higher than my attack power.

Besides, Araba is a hardened warrior who can avoid all my attacks with ease.

So I gave up on the dragon's HP altogether.

If I couldn't reduce its HP, I'd just have to reduce its SP.

And the key to that was Sloth.

The fourth broken skill I've acquired.

I picked up Sloth as soon as I evolved into an Ede Saine.

Honestly, I didn't really understand the description, so I didn't think much of it at first. But when I got it and tested it out, I was surprised by what a perfect skill it was for me.

With Jinx Evil Eye, not only HP but all other stats go down more quickly.

That didn't have much effect on Araba, but for any opponent without Status Condition Resistance, I can basically win with this nasty combo alone.

Even against enemies that it won't work on so easily, if I just get them to fight me with their full strength, it'll eventually become a powerful disadvantage.

It's only because Araba fought so desperately that the dragon used all its strength and I managed to make its SP go down so quickly.

If Araba had been more relaxed, the outcome might've been different.

The fact that the dragon never paused or let down its guard is

exactly what led to its downfall.

A pretty dirty strategy, if I do say so myself.

On top of that, forcing it to use Spatial Maneuvering made its SP go down that much faster.

I didn't just choose this pit as the site of our battle so I could keep Araba from using the earth as a weapon. It was also to force the dragon to expend more SP.

Although, thanks to Araba's unexpected resourcefulness, that first part ended up failing regardless.

Anyway, now that Araba can't move, I can fire as much magic as I want.

Will I run through its HP first, or will it run out of SP first?

What'll it be?

Mentally wearing a smug smile, I look down at Araba, still lying on a burning bridge beneath me.

Araba slowly raises its head.

Our eyes meet.

I can't believe it.

Its eyes are astoundingly clear. Calm, even.

What's with those eyes?

I beat you, you know.

At least act frustrated about your loss!

As if in defiance of my rage, Araba slowly lays itself down on its side.

Only its head stays in place, looking straight at me.

Then, something strange happens to Araba's status as I Appraise it.

The text displaying its skills starts to turn gray.

That can only mean Araba's turning off its skills.

If you turn off a skill that's normally activated, it turns gray in your Appraisal results.

Araba's skills turn gray one after another.

The Divine Scales skill that caused me so much trouble.

All its resistance skills, too.

Still surrounded by flames, the rate of Araba's HP reduction rises sharply.

"I'm not going to resist," is that what you're saying?

What's up with that? Seriously...what is this?

Who said you could just decide to be satisfied?

"I fought my hardest, so I have no regrets," is that it?

Is that what you're trying to say, huh?

Don't give me that crap.

Come on, get desperate here. Beg for your life or something. Struggle a little.

How can you just throw away your life so easily?

Once you lose your life, that's it. You know that, right?

I know that might not be convincing coming from me, since I've been reincarnated and all, but normally, when you die, that's it.

How can you face your own end with such dignity?

Why am I struggling so hard to refuse to let it end, then?

Or could it be you know that in this world, dying doesn't mean the end, and that's why you can be so calm about it?

If that's the case, that just pisses me off even more.

Ugh, forget it already.

I'll kill you if you want to die so badly, then.

I activate all my Evil Eyes.

Jinx, Inert, Repellent, and...Annihilating.

Araba's body crumbles into dust and disappears, without the slightest hint of resistance.

The Divine Voice (temp.) announces my leveling up, but it rings hollow in my ears.

I finally won against the opponent I was so eager to defeat, but it left a terrible aftertaste.



Interlude

THE DEMON LORD'S MEMORIES OF THE EARTH DRAGON

"Balto, have you ever encountered a dragon?"

The sudden question makes me tilt my head quizzically even as I answer.

"I have not. A wyrm, yes, but not a dragon."

"Right, of course."

The Demon Lord seems content with my answer.

Slouching in her chair with her feet up on the table, she isn't exactly the picture of class.

But I doubt anyone alive would be able to tell this one off, so I have no choice but to pretend not to notice.

White sits quietly in one corner of the room.

Unlike the Demon Lord, she's quite well behaved, but because of her already eerie nature, her perfect posture only makes her seem that much more mysterious.

"Did something happen to prompt such a question, My Lord?"

I regret the question as soon as I ask it.

It's not as if this is the first time she's asked something so spontaneously.

Why would I ask a question when I want this conversation to wrap up as quickly as possible?

"Hmm? Oh, I was just doing a little thinking about the past, heh. I've actually fought an earth dragon and stuff, y'know."

To be honest, that doesn't really surprise me.

Dragons are particularly special, even among monsters.

Normally, just seeing one is rare enough, but the Demon Lord just casually remarked that she's fought one.

From anyone else, that would be preposterous, but for her, it's alarmingly probable.

"Earth dragons are a pretty proud bunch," the Demon Lord remarks. "Those guys definitely have the blood of samurai in their veins."

That's all well and good for you, but what exactly is a samurai?

I'm curious, but if I ask about it, this little chat will only get longer.

Just talking to the Demon Lord can shorten your life span, as far as I'm concerned.

I must restrain myself from asking questions that would prolong the conversation.

"I've seen lots of different dragons, but thinking back, earth dragons were probably the most decent ones."

The Demon Lord offhandedly drops another bombshell statement.

Lots of different dragons.

Is that true?

The scary part is, since it's the Demon Lord saying it, it might really be so.

Again, I'm intrigued, but it's probably better not to ask.

"Whoops, sorry. Listen to me rambling on."

"Not at all."

"So, can I count on you to prepare for the attack on the elf village?"

"As you wish, O Demon Lord."

EARTH DRAGON ARABA

LV.01

status

HP

3067 / 3067

MP

2902 / 2902

SP

2943 / 2943

2945 / 2945

Average Offensive Ability : 2956

Average Defensive Ability : 2955

Average Magic Ability : 2877

Average Resistance Ability : 2901

Average Speed Ability : 2954

skill

[Earth Dragon LV 1] [Imperial Scales LV 8] [Hard Armor LV 6] [Steel Body LV 6] [HP Rapid Recovery LV 2] [MP Rapid Recovery LV 1] [MP Minimized Consumption LV 1] [Magic Power Perception LV 10] [Magic Power Operation LV 7] [Magic Warfare LV 4] [Magic Power Attack LV 6] [SP Rapid Recovery LV 2] [SP Minimized Consumption LV 2] [Mental Warfare LV 7] [Energy Attack LV 7] [Terrain Attack LV 5] [Terrain Enhancement LV 7] [Destruction Enhancement LV 7] [Cutting Enhancement LV 8] [Piercing Enhancement LV 5] [Impact Enhancement LV 7] [Dimensional Maneuvering LV 2] [Hit LV 10] [Evasion LV 10] [Probability Super-Correction LV 1] [Stealth LV 9] [Danger Perception LV 10] [Presence Perception LV 10] [Heat Perception LV 8] [Motion Perception LV 4] [Earth Magic LV 9] [Shadow Magic LV 8] [Destruction Resistance LV 6] [Cutting Resistance LV 8] [Piercing Resistance LV 7] [Impact Super-Resistance LV 1] [Shock Resistance LV 6] [Terrain Nullification] [Fire Resistance LV 2] [Lightning Resistance LV 4] [Water Resistance LV 1] [Wind Resistance LV 2] [Dark Resistance LV 1] [Status Condition Super-Resistance LV 3] [Rot Resistance LV 3] [Pain Nullification] [Pain Super-Mitigation LV 3] [Night Vision LV 10] [Vision Expansion LV 5] [Vision Enhancement LV 10] [Telescopic Sight LV 2] [Auditory Enhancement LV 8] [Olfactory Enhancement LV 3] [Tactile Enhancement LV 2] [Longevity LV 9] [Magic Hoard LV 8] [Fortune LV 8] [Herculean Strength LV 8] [Sturdy LV 8] [Monk LV 7] [Talisman LV 7] [Acceleration LV 8]

A type of earth dragon. It has especially comprehensive abilities even for its species and can utilize excellent battle strategies that run circles around other earth dragons at the same level. Its intelligence is exceptionally high as well, clearly distinguishing it from other monsters. An all-rounder with high physical and magic attack power, able to use both at the same time in battle. Danger level S.



Final Chapter

I'M GOING OUTSIDE!

It's been several days since I defeated the earth dragon Araba.

Now, I'm out underneath a blue sky.

For the first time since I was reborn as a spider, after a great deal of time and effort, I take in the sun's rays.

It's thanks to the four humans who ran away after that encounter.

I used the markings I put on them to finally navigate to the labyrinth's exit.

A lot has happened in this dungeon.

I can't say most of those memories are good ones, either.

Like the time I almost died, or the time I almost died, or the OTHER time I almost died!

So now I finally get to say my good-byes to this awful place!

Farewell, not-so-beloved birthplace!

Well, if anything happens, I can always teleport back here, so I do kinda have a feeling I'll be back at some point.

But now, brand-new gourmet experiences are calling to me!

Wait for me, delicious mysteries!

Now, how am I going to get into a human settlement?

That's the next problem I have to solve.



AFTERWORD

Hello there. It's me, Okina Baba, whose daily routine is to unleash a mysterious groan as my wild delusions implode on themselves.

Just today, I was under the delusion that Volume 3 went on sale!

Huh? That wasn't a delusion?

And there's a volume of manga now, too?

Ha-ha-ha. You're such a joker, dear reader.

For real?!

So, the manga edition of *Spider* is now on sale as well.

When I was first approached about the manga, I thought my ears were deceiving me.

I mean, a manga means pictures, right?

Don't you know what the protagonist of this story is?

She's a spider, that's what!

No way is anyone going to want to draw or look at that.

Not to mention, there are quite a few other scenes that probably should never be drawn, either.

However, when I got to see the completed manga with my own eyes, all those absurd fears vanished immediately.

The protagonist is drawn in a lively and comical way, never once giving off the grossness of a spider.

It's not like what I imagined—it's even better.

Asahiro Kakashi, the artist of the manga version, has done a wonderful job.

At this point, I can't even count the number of times I've thought, *Is Kakashi a genius or what?!*

Please do give it a read.

Now, it appears we've reached the third volume of *Spider*.

I don't know whether to say "It's already Volume 3" or "It's only Volume 3."

Considering the story as a whole, we're basically just wrapping up the opening act now, so maybe it's better to say "only."

The web version isn't complete yet, either, but we still have a ways to go before the print novel version catches up.

Our spider's battle has only just begun!

I feel like she's already been battling nonstop for three volumes, but still, there's a long way to go from here!

Now, let me say a few words of thanks.

To Tsukasa Kiryu, who always brings the world of *So I'm a Spider* to life so beautifully.

To Asahiro Kakashi, who does a wonderful job of telling the story of *Spider* in exciting manga form.

To my editor K, and everyone else who worked hard to bring this book into the world.

And to everyone who has picked up this book now.

Thank you very much.

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